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IN MUFTI

PHILIP CURTISS



Fiction, American



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MUMMERS IN MUFTI



Mummers in Mufti

BY
PHILIP CURTISS

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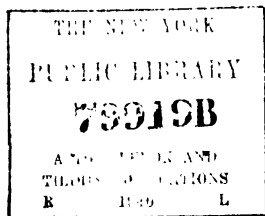


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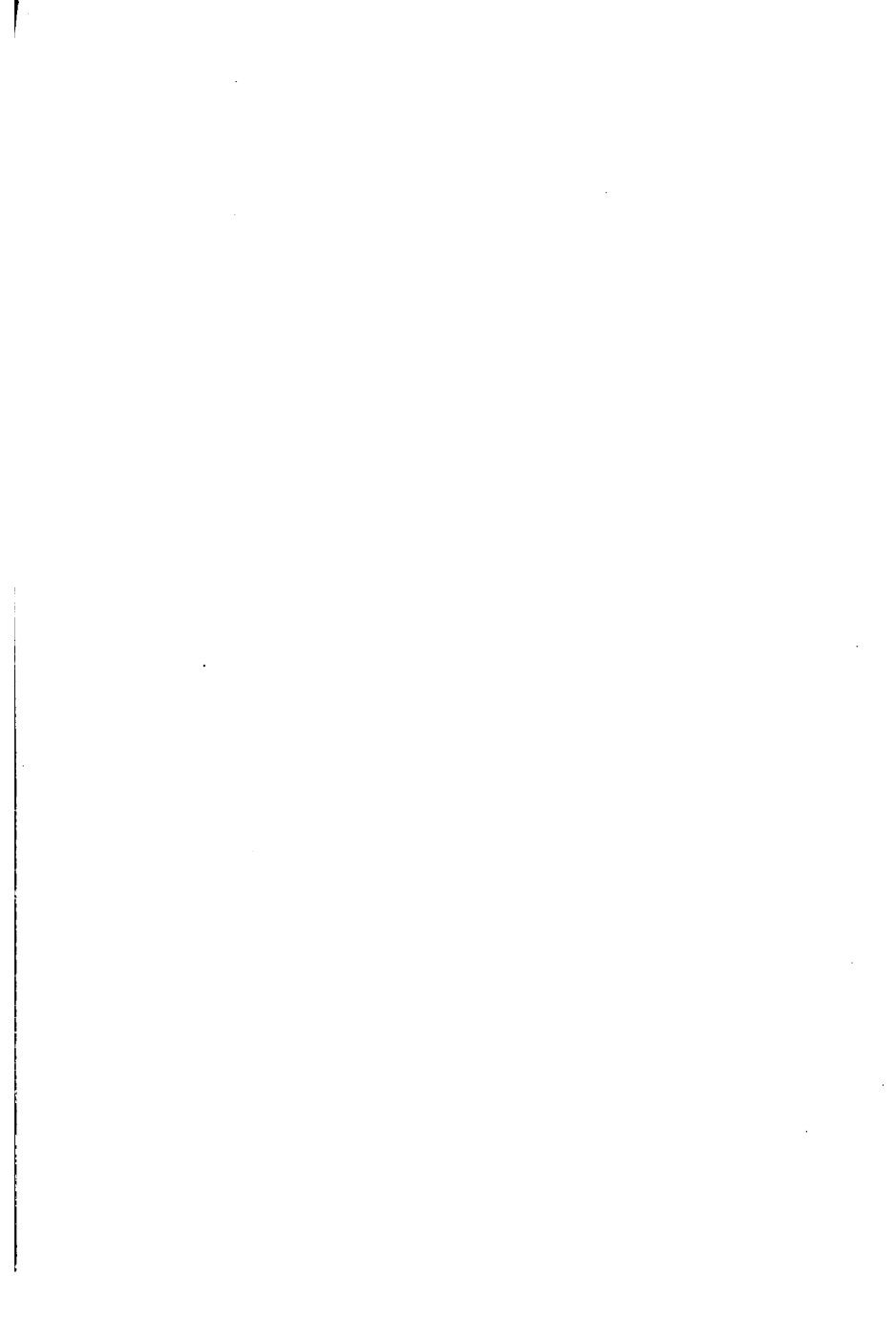
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To VALLI VALLI

My dear sister-in-law, with whom I quarrel, tooth and nail, about such vital subjects as the Puritan viewpoint, the mentality of Irish terriers, and the dates of the Soudan campaign, but with whom I agree devoutly in a deep love for what can be and sometimes is a genuine art form—the modern musical comedy

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MUMMERS IN MUFTI

• • • in the course of one revolving moon
Was chymist, fiddler, statesman, and buffoon.
Dryden.

MUMMERS IN MUFTI

CHAPTER I

“**Y**OU are suffering,” said the doctor, quietly, “from a disease for which no cure has ever been known.”

The doctor snapped together the arms of his stethoscope, much as a lawyer might have snapped his glasses at the close of a hard-fought trial, turned to his desk, and began to lay the instrument deliberately in its case. His specialty was diseases of the nervous system, and his whole office had the luxurious, airy sparseness which such a specialty would have implied. It appeared more like an architect's office than a physician's.

Arnold Bellsmith, standing before him with coat and waistcoat in disarray watched him with a sudden grip at his heart, which, however, was purely a physical reaction to the mere sound of the doctor's words. Although this was his first professional consultation with Dr. MacVickar, Bellsmith had known him casually for some years and he did not, after his first convulsive start, take the physician's verdict at its face-value. A tentative, nervous smile crossed his lips.

“Well,” he asked, with a weak attempt at forced humor, “just—just how long do you give me to live?”

The Scotch doctor turned abruptly with the almost

brutal gruffness which even polished practitioners sometimes seem called on to use.

"What did you say?" he demanded.

The nervous smile wavered again over Bellsmith's lips, but this time with less assurance.

"I asked," he faltered, "how long you gave me to live."

The doctor surveyed him from head to toe, as if that glance alone were sufficient to give him his answer.

"How long do I give you to live?" he repeated.

With agonizing deliberateness he placed a rubber band around the stethoscope case and slipped under it a note of some kind for his office nurse: then, with a twinkle in his eye, he looked back at Bellsmith.

"About eighty years," he replied. "Unless," he added as an afterthought, "unless you blow out your own brains some rainy night, over there in that old house of yours, or unless you get to brooding so hard that you think you've slipped over the edge and your misguided friends cart you off to some sanatorium."

Bellsmith smiled again, but this time in pure ruefulness. He began to button his waistcoat with prim, exact gestures, pulling it down with a tug as he fastened each button.

"Doctor, I almost believed you," he said. "You spoke so sharply you startled me."

"Did I?" replied the doctor, non-committally.

He seated himself at his desk, took up a fountain-pen, and, drawing toward him the card which the nurse had handed him as Bellsmith entered, wrote a brief line or two in careful letters, as square as print.

"How old did you say you were?"

"Thirty-five," replied Bellsmith, as if there were something to be ashamed of in that age.

The doctor carefully wrote down the figures, then studied the card with narrowed eyes, as if he were making a steel-engraving. Having apparently formed his opinion, he suddenly threw down his pen and looked back at Bellsmith with an amiable smile which seemed preparatory to dismissal.

"Mr. Bellsmith," he announced, with a brisk change of tone, "organically there is not one single thing the matter with you. Of course you need calomel. Men of your type usually do, but, outside of that, any insurance company would jump at you as a risk."

Bellsmith absently strung his fine gold watch-chain through a top buttonhole of his waistcoat, mechanically felt of his pockets, and settled his coat at the back of the collar. As he stood there slightly stooped and feeling somewhat like a school-boy, he was aware of a ridiculous sense of disappointment. He had not really expected that this long-advised, long-deferred visit to the nerve specialist would develop anything he did not already know, but it seemed a gross anticlimax to be told that in so many words.

"Then," he began, rather shamefaced, "the incurable disease from which I am suffering is nothing but pure imagination?"

"Oh, not at all! not at all!" protested the doctor, firmly. "It is real enough, but its cure is outside the province of pathology. Sit down."

With really pathetic eagerness Bellsmith sank into

a big leather chair for, in spite of what the doctor had said, he still felt no relief from the ominous and oppressive dread which had been hanging over his mind for months and which had caused him, in desperation, to make this appointment. He really did feel that he would gain a distinct relief if he could only talk his case out with some one as briskly competent, some one as crisply sure of himself, as Dr. MacVickar. Probably Dr. MacVickar, for his part, realized fully this longing to talk, in fact had provided for it, as he leaned back sociably in his desk-chair and prepared to let the flood come.

Bellsmith's fingers wandered aimlessly over his knees, and his eyes began searching the adjacent furniture.

"What are you looking for?" asked the doctor. "A cigarette?"

"I had n't thought of it," answered Bellsmith, but his expression belied him. He looked around quizzically at the ultra-modernity of the office. "I suppose that it would n't do to smoke here?"

"Wait a minute," ordered the doctor.

He rose briskly, opened a door, and called to the nurse, who sat at a telephone-desk in the tiny hallway. He asked a question or two, she showed him a pad of appointments, and Dr. MacVickar turned back to Bellsmith:

"Would you mind waiting a moment out here? Leave your coat and hat where they are."

As Bellsmith stepped into the passage, the door of the waiting-room was opened by the nurse, and a young

woman, quietly dressed, with a demure, preoccupied expression, was ushered into the hall. For a moment Bellsmith and she were brought face to face, and the girl's expression suddenly lightened into a smile, but, before Bellsmith could do more than stare at her, amazed, the smile was checked and the girl looked away, embarrassed and apparently a good bit angered at herself. In the darkened hallway standing without his hat and coat, she had mistaken him for the doctor.

Bellsmith stepped aside and allowed her to pass, but, in that brief, embarrassed moment, he had caught and retained a strangely vivid impression of her. He had a feeling, not that he knew her, but that he ought to know her, such a sensation as he might have had on suddenly coming face to face with a person whom he had frequently heard described but whom he had never actually met.

And, at that, was he sure that he had not met this young woman somewhere—somebody's sister, somebody's cousin? She was obviously a girl of the type with which he was most familiar, in fact the only type with which he was really familiar, yet there had been about her an instant suggestion of something different from the average girl in the City of Leicester, something professional possibly, something, again, which Bellsmith knew that he recognized but which he could not exactly identify.

In the meantime Dr. MacVickar had appeared at the door of his consultation-room and the girl had passed in. Bellsmith heard a brief, hearty greeting and a

reply. He heard the doctor say, "Well, and how are you feeling to-day?" and then the door closed behind them.

Bellsmith turned to the nurse, feeling, vaguely, that, under the circumstances, she might feel it her duty to amuse him, but the nurse was already seated at her little telephone-desk and, with a great show of business, had begun to write rapidly on one of the doctor's endless catalogue-cards. Bellsmith sat down on the oak settle by the entrance door and watched her idly.

"What innumerable ways," he pondered. "the human race has of keeping busy!"

CHAPTER II

IN fifteen minutes the door of the consultation-room opened and the girl came out, but this time she looked neither to right nor to left as she walked rapidly and self-consciously to the entrance door. The doctor appeared immediately and invited Bellsmith to reënter, closing the door behind him with an air of finality.

"Now sit down," he commanded genially, "and smoke as much as you please. That clears me up for the day."

Bellsmith sat down, drew from his pocket a pair of long, rich cigars, obviously of a private brand, and offered one to the doctor.

"No, thank you," said the doctor, shaking his head; but he watched Bellsmith's movements with more intentness than he seemed to show, as Bellsmith neatly clipped his cigar with a silver cutter from his waistcoat pocket, slowly replaced the instrument, then, with equal deliberateness, took a wax match from a platinum case.

His slow, precise, slightly halting movements told the physician more than his actual physical examination had told. They gave him a very fair picture of Bellsmith's story, a picture that was well rounded out by the rich, exquisite cigars which the patient drew out so naturally. Prosperous as he was in his practice and much more prosperous as he would inevitably be, the

doctor knew that he himself would never be a man who could make such a rite of his smoking,—would, indeed, never learn to smoke “vintage” cigars at all hours of the day with the unconscious casualness that was inborn in the man before him. A lifetime devoted to petty things, a whole existence centered on the most minute and delicate trifles of genteel living, that was the picture which was as clearly portrayed in the man’s every move as if he had been painfully acting a studied character rôle.

The slow rites over the long cigar did, however, have one effect on the doctor. The sight of them probably proved too enticing even for his professional self-restraint, for impulsively reaching into a drawer of his desk, he took out a brier pipe, very black and much smoked down at one side. He rapped it out on his heel, and a moment later the fragrant blue smoke of Kentucky tobacco was mingling itself with the thinner gray smoke of Bellsmith’s cigar. It was a wise move on the doctor’s part, for with his first puff Bellsmith’s guilty self-consciousness began to relax.

“Before we take up my own case, doctor,” he began socially, “I suppose that it would be wholly unethical to ask you the name of that girl who was in here just now.”

Put in words, the question did seem rather bald, and he added apologetically, “I had a vague feeling that I recognized her. Haven’t I seen her somewhere?”

The doctor’s lips twitched in a rather attractive Scotch smile around the stem of his pipe.

"You probably have," he replied.

An awkward silence followed and the doctor added, amused: "Really I don't suppose that there is any reason at all why I should not tell you. You're likely to see her again any day, but, just the same, I presume I had better not."

It was hardly strange that his manner of putting it only increased Bellsmith's curiosity and he quite forgot himself.

"Is she a Leicester girl?" he pursued eagerly.

The doctor grinned, like an older man teasing a child.

"No, she is not," he replied. "I can tell you that much."

Bellsmith leaned back in his chair. He knew that he would get no more information, but his curiosity was still acute. He was certain now that he *had* seen the girl somewhere.

"Did it ever occur to you, doctor," he suggested, "that people who meet in a physician's office always feel sort of chummy toward one another, like passengers on the same boat?"

"Yes," drawled the doctor, "I've recognized that frequently. That's why I have to school myself not to talk."

The silence again was becoming awkward, and Bellsmith regretfully forced himself to remember that this was not merely a social smoke but a professional call. He was sorry to have to realize that fact for now, as the dusk began to fall and soften the brisk, offensively modern lines of the consultation-room, he began to feel

more at ease than he had in months. Possibly that again was one of the very things that made Dr. MacVickar a huge success as a mental specialist.

Bellsmith tapped the ash from his cigar into a metal waste-basket.

"Well, doctor," he began, a little on the defensive, "I suppose that you are putting me down in your mind as merely one more ass who has so little else to worry about that he thinks he is sick."

To his surprise, the doctor held up his hand in strict protest. "Now, wait a minute, Mr. Bellsmith. I didn't say that there was nothing the matter with you. There is something very definite the matter with you. I mean to get at it before you go."

But Bellsmith was still determined to mock at himself. "Is there—is there any name for this terrible malady from which I am suffering, this disease for which there has never been any known cure?"

The doctor did not respond to his levity.

"There are," he replied, "plenty of names compounded of Greek and Latin by which your state could be roughly described by one medical man to another; but these names are merely sketchy. They more often describe the manifestation than the trouble itself."

"But," interrupted Bellsmith impatiently, "they can, in plain English, be covered by the single term of damn foolishness?"

"If you thought that that covered your case," suggested the doctor quietly, "why did you ever come to me?"

Bellsmith was instantly as rueful as a school-boy.

"Doctor," he said, "I didn't mean to speak flip-pantly but, for more than three years, I have been trying to laugh myself out of this state of wretchedness, I have been calling my trouble just what I have called it now—damn foolishness. I have tried exercise. I have tried"—he smiled—"I have tried calomel. Most of all I have tried will power. None of them have done me the slightest atom of good. In a day or two I always am back where I was before—in a sort of dull, hopeless melancholia."

The doctor was listening intently, faintly nodding his head, and Bellsmith was increasingly reassured, encouraged to go on with what he had been afraid every moment would be dismissed as sheer nonsense.

"Now, just a minute, Mr. Bellsmith," interrupted the doctor at last. "You have evidently given a great deal of honest thought to your own case. Just how do you yourself describe your condition, in your own mind—if you try to describe it at all?"

"I suppose if I told you," began Bellsmith haltingly, "you would say that it was merely a symptom."

"Possibly not," encouraged the doctor.

"Well, then," continued Bellsmith, "it all comes down to this: I am, so far as I can see, a normal, healthy, intelligent sort of man, yet the fact remains that I cannot, week in or week out, year in or year out, get up one single atom of interest in any man, woman, or child or in anything else under the sun. I seem to be in a chronic state of utter indifference. I continue to live in the world, but, for all practical purposes, the world for me has ceased to exist. Everything, big

and little, that other people are doing, seems to me silly and futile. I am not interested in anything myself, and it irritates me to see other people interested in anything. That is hardly the proper state for a man to be in."

He looked up fearfully to see how his amateurish and faltering explanation had been received but the doctor was nodding sympathetically. Encouraged, Bellsmith went on:

"If that state were merely temporary, I should consider it just weariness or plain, old-fashioned boredom, but I don't know whether you will believe, doctor, the lengths to which it has gone."

"I have seen such cases before," remarked the doctor, reassuringly.

"The strange part of it is," continued Bellsmith, "that I have never been the type of man who easily gives in to boredom. I have always hoped that I had too much brains for that."

He stretched out his arms as if to give the doctor a view of his whole body. "I am certainly not the type that is commonly known as 'a burnt-out man.'"

The doctor did not need to glance again at Bellsmith's quiet, fastidious dress, his precise, exact attitude, his intellectual, sensitive face, to agree with him on that point.

"No," he said with a smile, "you certainly do not look like a man who has gone the pace."

"Thank you for that," laughed Bellsmith, but immediately his face settled again into its habitual ex-

pression of worried languor. "Am I boring you?" he asked suddenly.

"Assuredly not," said the doctor. "Let me ask you one thing. I understand, Mr. Bellsmith, that you have never engaged in any profession or business?"

The question was wholly a formal one. What the doctor really meant to say was, "Have you ever done a stroke of work in your life?"

That Bellsmith understood this to be the real question he showed by his answer. He laughed outright.

"Doctor," he exclaimed, "you are spoiling my story. I suppose, in the back of your mind, you are aching to tell me that if I would go out and get a job shoveling dirt my worries would clear up like magic."

The doctor grinned. He picked up his fountain-pen and screwed on the cap.

"As a temporary expedient," he replied, "that would n't be bad advice, but the trouble is that you can't keep on shoveling dirt forever. I can't quite feel that my duty would be completed by turning you permanently into a day-laborer.

"Just let me ask you a question or two," he continued. "You are not fond of social life?"

"On the contrary," protested Bellsmith, "I have always been very fond of it—until the last three or four years. I used to like people. I used to like to talk. I went to dinners and dances three or four nights a week. Then, slowly, for no apparent reason—"

The doctor interrupted him. "Shall I tell you what happened?"

"Why—why, yes, if you can," replied Bellsmith.

"I should like to try," answered the doctor, with a quiet smile. "Well, then, was this about what happened in your social life? One day you began to feel that the dances were not as lively, not as interesting as they had been in previous years. The girls were not as pretty and those who *were* fairly pretty you found to be childish and silly. You formed the habit of going late to the dances and spending your time largely at the smoking-room door. You began to look eagerly for fresh faces, for new girls from out of town; and then you found even those to be a dull lot. You got to the point where you would spend fifteen minutes making up your mind to ask any special girl to dance, and then, the moment you had asked her, you wished that you had n't.

"The same way with dinners. There was a time when a formal dinner seemed like a chapter out of a novel, an act in a play. The candles, the wines, the talk made you feel that you were an actor in some subtle drama. Then—it was three or four years ago, you say—there came a time when you would sit down to the soup and wonder how under heaven you were ever going to get through it. Am I on the right track?"

"Your description is uncanny," said Bellsmith, with a nervous laugh; "but, doctor, are n't you simply describing the symptoms of old age?"

"Thirty-five is not old," replied Dr. MacVickar. "Men, as a rule, do not curl up in a chimney-corner simply because they are thirty-five."

"Very well," answered Bellsmith. "Continue with

your inquisition. I want to see how far you can go."

"Of course I can merely suggest," said the doctor. "Now, aside from a regular business, have you never had any definite occupation? Have you never been interested in any organizations? Any hobbies or studies?"

"Music," replied Bellsmith. "I am very much interested in music. At least I used to be."

"Used to be?" queried the doctor. "It seems to me that you are using that phrase with a dangerous frequency. What happened to your music?"

Bellsmith shrugged. "Oh, I don't know. I just seem to have drifted out of it. I went into it deeply once. It ran in the family. My father had the most accurate ear I have ever known. I even composed a whole light opera once and a couple of suites. But I seem to have lost heart about it."

"Shall I tell you why?" retorted the doctor. "You had high hopes for your suites and your opera. You took them to one or two critics, possibly a publisher. They didn't seem to go wild about them right off the bat. They possibly even patronized you or snubbed you, and, at the first hostile word, you drew back into your shell and laid your manuscripts on the shelf. You probably took a high and mighty resolve never to compose another note and felt that you were doing something heroic and noble. Was that about it?"

"I suppose so," replied Bellsmith, wearily. There was a guilty look in his eye, and the doctor knew that he had not been far wrong.

"How about sport?" he suggested. "Ever do anything in that line?"

"Doctor!" exclaimed Bellsmith, "I *hate* sport. Between the two I'd rather be sick. Once I tried riding horseback every day. That horse in the stable simply became a nightmare to me. I used to long for a rainy day, so that I would n't have to exercise."

The doctor laughed. "But what *do* you honestly like to do?" he demanded. "There must be something. You look to me like a student. I would have said that you were the kind of man who would ask nothing better than a well-stocked library and an undisturbed evening. Are n't you fond of reading?"

"Passionately fond of it," replied Bellsmith. "At least I once was—" But the doctor saw that he was merely going to repeat the same formula and broke in with one of his own suggestions which seemed to Bellsmith almost clairvoyant.

"But even there you find the same restlessness," he suggested. "You face a whole roomful of books yet cannot find one that you feel the slightest desire to read. You sit down with two or three books at once, read a page in one, look at the pictures in another, until you have four or five of them open on the table beside you. The book you have n't got is always the one you want. I venture to suggest that you have not actually read a book this year from cover to cover. Is that true?"

Bellsmith nodded and the doctor continued.

"Do you also find yourself reading one paragraph over and over, just getting the rhythm of the words but

none of their meaning, and then, hours later, when you go off on some errand about the house, find yourself still reciting, over and over, some insignificant sentence, as if it were a sort of religious rite?"

Bellsmith half started out of his chair.

"Doctor!" he exclaimed, "you're a wizard!"

The doctor smiled deprecatingly but was not ill pleased with the success of his venture.

"I merely wished to comfort you," he said, "by the proof that you are not the first victim of this curious state of mind."

"Oh, I never thought that I was," replied Bellsmith. "Tell me some more, doctor. This is rather fun—like going to a fortune-teller."

Possibly the doctor did not care for the simile, or possibly he felt that he had learned enough on that line. He changed his tone to one less social and more professional.

"Now, Mr. Bellsmith, all that you have told me bears on the case, but this was not what you came here to tell me. Frankly what was it?"

He looked at Bellsmith sharply and the latter hung his head. It was a long time before he replied, and then it was in a low voice that was suddenly shaky.

"You are quite right," he confessed. "To tell the truth, doctor, I am terrified by the fear that I am going insane."

"So?" asked the doctor, quietly and without alarm. "What makes you think so?"

"The little things," replied Bellsmith, slowly.

For a moment he found it impossible to go on but

sat in silence, his eyes on the floor, his lips twitching oddly. The doctor made no effort to prompt him but at the same time avoided the slightest gesture which might distract him.

"It seems so foolish," blurted out Bellsmith at last, "when I try to put it into words. I—I don't know where to begin."

"Begin with anything," suggested the doctor. "Don't mind if it seems only a trifle."

"Well," began Bellsmith, "here's an example: Last night I was sitting in my library when I noticed a crack in the glass of one of the long French windows which open into the garden. It let in a tiny current of air and ruffled the curtains. Now, instead of making a note to call up a glazier and get it fixed in the morning, I sat and brooded over that crack until it had monopolized my whole evening. I went upstairs and got papers and pasted over it. Then I would keep going back and holding my hand in front of it. I lighted matches and held them above it to see if there was still a faint draft. I must have spent an hour in that idiotic pastime, and even then I could n't keep my mind off it. I still tossed and worried about it after I was in bed."

The doctor nodded gravely, and at last Bellsmith had found the gates of confession.

"That's typical of how I spend half my time," he hurried on angrily, "but that's not the worst of it by any means. For one thing, I seem to have, these days, a curious horror of being called on to make the simplest decision. I want to put everything off, even the most

trivial things. I hate to face a day knowing that I have the slightest obligation. I dread hearing my butler coming to ask me what I will have for dinner. I don't want to talk about it. I don't want to make up my mind. It is the hardest thing for me to bring myself to answer a letter. When I receive a letter that calls for an answer I will put it in a certain pigeonhole in my desk and feel somehow that that disposes of it for the time being. My desk is crammed with such pigeonholes.

"I seem to have almost a physical dread of being lured into engagements. I will promise anything to anybody, so long as it is left vague and far in the future, but when any one tries to pin me down to a definite day I suddenly become reluctant and hostile. It irritates me to come home and find a message asking me to call up a certain number on the 'phone. I will deliberately go about something else and try to forget it. If I go to the telephone of my own accord and don't immediately get the number I call for, I hang up and never do anything more about it—welcome the excuse that I could n't get the person for whom I called."

"From which I gather," suggested the doctor, with a smile, "that your social engagements tend to become fewer and fewer."

"They do," confessed Bellsmith.

The doctor sat for a moment in thought.

"Do you mean by that," he began tentatively, "that you have a distaste for people in general?"

"No," replied Bellsmith, slowly, "it is very funny

about that. I am horribly lonely. I still seem eager to be with people, but I never seem to find just the right people."

"There are no such people in the world," laughed Dr. MacVickar.

Bellsmith joined nervously in his laugh. "I suppose there are n't, but I am vaguely always hunting. I am always wandering around the clubs and places like that, looking for company—"

"Seeking the eternal adventure," suggested the doctor.

"Oh, I don't ask for adventure," replied Bellsmith. "All I want is some one, not too stupid, to talk to."

"And when you get him you don't want him."

"Exactly. I will be sitting at home, frantically lonely, but if any one comes in to see me the chances are that after he has been there a minute or two I will begin to fret and wish he would go. Sometimes when I am at my worst, if I see people I know coming toward me on the street, I will actually cross to the other side to avoid meeting them, simply because I am afraid that they will stop me to talk."

The doctor relit his pipe and for a moment sat twirling the match in his fingers.

"Since we are both loyal citizens and voters," he began with a whimsical smile, "I can ask whether that applies merely to residents of Leicester or to people in other places. Do you ever go anywhere else? Do you ever travel?"

"Not now," confessed Bellsmith. "I used to. I don't any more."

"Why not?" asked the doctor bluntly. "Afraid of trains?"

Bellsmith started and looked at him with a shame-faced expression that told its own story.

"No," he replied, reluctantly, "not really. Yes, I suppose that I am, in a way. That is to say, I am not afraid of wrecks or things like that, but I am foolishly nervous—"

"About time-tables and impertinent ticket-agents and making connections and things of that kind," supplied the doctor.

Bellsmith looked at him in wonder. "To tell the truth, that's just about the size of it. It sounds ridiculous, but subways and transfers and reservations and things of that kind always appall me. I never go to New York now unless I have to. They're always changing the methods of doing things down there, and I have a horror of doing things wrong. I hate to ask questions, doctor. I can't bear to stand in line. If I can't get tickets for the theater at my hotel I don't go at all. I will walk from Forty-second Street to the Park rather than try to get on one of those damned surface-cars. They always seem to stop at a different corner every time I go to New York."

The doctor smiled. "You don't suppose that you are alone in those particulars, do you?"

Bellsmith grinned, ruefully. "I hope not."

The doctor apparently decided that it was time to pursue another tack.

"How about your personal habits?" he asked. "Do you find that you have grown lax or extremely fussy?"

"Fussy beyond belief," replied Bellsmith. "I have got to a state where I can hardly do a single thing without a certain elaborate formula. For instance, if I go into a wash-room at a hotel or club I cannot wash my hands without first taking a towel and dusting my shoes. If I don't, I don't feel clean. When I am dressing for dinner, even if I am in a hurry, I never take off my coat and waistcoat together, the way most men do. I must take them off separately and hang them up on separate hangers. I can't bear to leave a pair of shoes even an hour without putting trees in them. If I can't find any trees, I stuff them full of newspaper. I always clean my nails before I brush my hair. If I brush my hair first it makes me feel queer and unsettled. I sometimes go back and do it over again in order to 'feel right.'"

"I understand," nodded the doctor, sympathetically, and Bellsmith found it increasingly easy to go on.

"When I sit down in the evening to read," he explained, "I have to have a certain door open two inches and all the other doors tight shut. I can't feel settled until they are just that way. Originally the reason for that was that the fireplace would not draw with the doors in any other position."

"In the beginning there usually is a reason for most of these things," commented the doctor.

"But now," continued Bellsmith, "I have to have the doors that way even where there is no fire. If some one comes into the room and leaves one of the other doors open I am perfectly miserable. I fuss and fidget until I can get up and shut it. Before I

light a cigarette I always have to tap it three times on my thumb nail, even though some one may be waiting with a lighted match. Anything upside down always makes me nervous, such as a sheet of music on a piano or a doily on the table. I am physically unhappy until I have set it right. It has got beyond a matter of simple neatness. There seems to be something like a hypnotic force compelling me to do all these things."

"I see," said the doctor in a low voice, and his face was more grave than it had been the whole afternoon. "But about bigger things?" he asked. "Do you feel a constant sense of abasement? Do you find that your conscience has become abnormally tyrannical?"

"I am not sure that I know just what you mean," replied Bellsmith, "but I do know that I can get perfectly miserable over the most futile things. For instance, when I am sitting alone in the evening a line in a book will remind me of some silly thing that I did years ago, perhaps some trivial social blob that I made when I was a boy, and I will flush hot with embarrassment, as if it were yesterday. It will make me unhappy all the evening. I will keep living the scene over and over again and try to justify myself in my own mind. If it passes out of my mind, I will force it back in again. Then there are certain phrases that fill me with a queer repugnance for no apparent reason. For instance I cannot read the name 'Catullus' without the feeling of having run into something that I had rather keep out of, although what the connection is I honestly have n't the faintest idea. The name of 'Carr Street' affects me the same way. There must be

some unpleasant association, although I have never been able to trace it."

"Do you dream?" asked the doctor, simply.

"Yes," said Bellsmith, "frequently. But, curiously, all my dreams are rather pleasant, although they are sort of pleasantly sad, if you know what I mean, a sort of delicious melancholy. As I wake up I feel as if I were losing something. I lie in bed and try to throw myself back into the atmosphere of the dream."

"And all of your dreams," suggested the doctor, "are of persons and incidents some time in the past—three or four years at least?"

Bellsmith again looked up startled. "How the deuce did you know that?"

The doctor laughed. "Every sentence that you have been saying has told me that."

The doctor straightened back in his chair as if he had heard enough, but he did not speak at once. Instead he sat toying with his fountain-pen, gazing down at his big, immaculate sheet of desk-blotted.

"Mr. Bellsmith," he said at last, "I will tell you this, for your comfort, that you are not going insane. Just the same you have got to take care of yourself, and at once."

"I want to," said Bellsmith woefully, "but what am I going to do?"

"Ah," said the doctor, "that is the question."

CHAPTER III

FOR a moment the two men sat in absolute silence, the one staring thoughtfully down at his desk, the other sitting stiffly erect in his chair with eyes fixed and anxious. The tension was broken by a dull buzz from under the desk, a signal so faint that in anything less than that absolute silence it would have passed unobserved.

The doctor took the receiver from his desk-telephone.

"Hello," he said, in an even, professional tone.

A reply of some length came over the wire. At the first word the doctor's face lightened, and when finally he answered his tones were eager and friendly.

"That 's very thoughtful of you," he was saying into the telephone. "I wish that I could, but, to tell the truth my wife and I are going out to dinner to-night."

He paused while the voice at the other end of the wire made other suggestions, then replied with the same kindly eagerness.

"Well, possibly I might, but I don't want to put you to any trouble. That 's very nice of you. All right. That will be the best place. Thank you again. Good-by."

He hung up the receiver and turned back to Bell-smith, his face relaxing into its former thoughtful ex-

pression, but somehow the complete confidence that had been established between the two men had been broken or, better, suspended, by the interruption. Both of them felt it, and it was probable that the doctor would never have permitted the interruption if he had not already known the time for ending the consultation to be at hand. As if in demonstration of this, he knocked out his pipe and put it back in its drawer.

"Mr. Bellsmith," he resumed, in a tone rather brisker than any that he had previously used, "I wish to say this. There is, about your case, one feature that is very unusual. That is the completeness and the accuracy with which you have recognized your own condition and the frankness with which you have been willing to state it. What you have told me in an hour it usually takes me months of the most guarded questions and closest observation to find out. And then it is frequently only surmise."

"Then you *do* know what is the matter with me?" asked Bellsmith eagerly.

"Yes," replied the doctor, "I do."

"What is it?"

The doctor laughed. "I do not think it wise to tell you just at the moment."

Bellsmith's expression changed instantly to one of alarm, and the doctor hastened to explain. "Not because the name of it would frighten you but because, if I really told you, you wouldn't take it seriously enough."

"Don't worry," said Bellsmith, "It's no joke to me." He paused hopefully, then suggested with gen-

uine wistfulness, "but you think that you can get me out of this state?"

"That depends."

"On what?"

"For one thing, on how faithfully you follow my directions."

"Good heavens, doctor, you don't think that I *like* being the mess that I am at present? I'm prepared to do anything to shake myself free."

The doctor smiled. "Even to the extent of playing tennis and riding horseback two hours a day?"

Bellsmith laughed in return. "Doctor, that's not fair."

The doctor opened and closed a drawer of his desk as if searching for something.

"Now you see," he remarked, "what a man in my profession is up against. If I could prescribe something easy, like a quinine pill, you would take it and bless me, but the minute that I prescribe anything calling for the slightest coöperation on your part you begin to balk. However," he added, still searching in the desk, "I am not going to inflict you with tennis. In fact, for the time being, I am not going to inflict you with anything except the promise to repeat this call every day for some time. Do you think that you can do that?"

"Gladly," replied Bellsmith. "To tell the truth I have rather enjoyed it."

The doctor had found the object for which he had been searching—his prescription-pad. He drew it from the drawer and sat over it with his pen held aloft.

"In the meantime," he continued, "do you want to do me a favor?"

Bellsmith glanced, puzzled, at the prescription-pad. "I thought you were n't going to give me anything to take."

The doctor laughed and put down his pen. "I think you will like to—take this. Are you going to be busy this evening?"

"No more busy than I ever am."

"Opening and closing doors and holding your hand over the window-pane?" suggested the doctor. "In that case I think you 're my man."

He wrote a few words on his pad and prepared to tear off the top sheet.

"A friend of mine," he explained, "has telephoned offering me a couple of seats at the theater—"

He said it casually but his casualness was just too well done, for, as he said the word "theater" a sudden light flashed over Bellsmith.

"Doctor," he exclaimed, "I know who she is!"

"Who?"

"The girl who was in here this afternoon. I don't know her name but I *knew* that I had seen her somewhere. Did n't she play in 'Miss Mischief' with Ada Sharpe, two years ago?"

The doctor laughed. "I don't know, but she might have."

Exultantly, Bellsmith hurried on. "The minute you began to talk on the telephone I had a suspicion that that was she who was talking; and when you said

'theater' I suddenly knew where I had seen her before."

"Mr. Bellsmith," remarked the doctor, "a man as astute as you are ought to be ashamed of himself for getting into the state that you are in now. I own up. It does n't make any difference, because you would have found out anyway. The point is, will you take those seats this evening—or one of them—and use it?"

"Very gladly," said Bellsmith.

The doctor sat looking thoughtfully at his desk-blotter, then spoke slowly, a faint smile twitching at the corners of his close-cropped mustache.

"That young lady whom you saw here this afternoon is Miss Tilly Marshall. She is a—a sort of connection of mine. She is playing here for two weeks with the 'Eleanor' company and naturally finds two weeks in a strange city rather dismal, so my wife and I would like to make it as pleasant for her as possible. As you heard me say, we could n't accept the seats Miss Marshall offered us for to-night, so I thought that it might amuse you to see the show."

"It would indeed," replied Bellsmith, eagerly. "Thank you very much."

The doctor, however, was not yet through. "If you care to have me," he continued, casually, "I should be very glad to give you a note of introduction to Miss Marshall." The doctor paused, then added tentatively, "If you felt like doing anything to make her stay here in Leicester more amusing, I am sure that she would appreciate it and I know that I should."

The doctor looked up expectantly, but poor Bellsmith was rather alarmed.

"Why, certainly, doctor," he began vaguely. "I should be glad to do anything that I can. Possibly she would like to have me send my car so that she could get out a bit. Would she care to meet some of the people in Leicester? What is she fond of? What sort of things does she like to do?"

The doctor laughed outright. "I don't think that she would like anything in the world except a plain human being to talk to."

Bellsmith blushed crimson. "I know, doctor, but I'm such a dumbhead where people of that kind are concerned. I'm so—I'm sort of stiff without meaning to be. I don't know anything about the stage or the things that she is interested in. I'd simply bore her to tears."

The doctor smiled. "I think you will find that she is interested in very much the same sort of things that you are." He saw that Bellsmith would get nowhere without his very active prompting, and so he finished abruptly: "Why in the world don't you send a note around and ask her to supper after the performance—or take her somewhere to dance? There must be places where you can go—the Stansfield Hotel for instance. Just go around to the stage-door after the show and send in your card."

Bellsmith's jaw dropped. But one must not find poor Bellsmith too incredible, as, to be blunt, Dr. MacVickar was beginning to find him, for it is sometimes rather uncanny to scratch the surface and dis-

cover how deeply the granite of Plymouth Rock still permeates the whole of New England, even in this day and generation. For the whole of his thirty-five years, Bellsmith had been unconsciously reared, not so much in the tradition of the Bay Psalm-book as in the tradition of the utter humiliation of the stage-door. Stage people of a certain distinctly literary cast he had occasionally met in a very formal way in New York at the afternoons of some dowdy woman who fondly believed that she had a "salon." Like all the men and indeed the women of his rather staid broking and banking circles, he could talk with a superficial and cynical glibness of this man or that who was not without his acquaintance in musical comedy life, but when he was suddenly brought face to face with such an adventure, applied to himself, right here in Leicester, even under such unimpeachable auspices as those of Dr. MacVickar, the idea pierced through to something within him far more fundamental than the thin veil of his sophisticated existence, his clubman's airs, or the memories of his four innocuous years at Yale University.

Dr. MacVickar saw plainly enough what was going on in his mind, but, not being himself a Leicester man, he saw without proper allowances. In fact what he saw made him decidedly huffy, distinctly sorry that he had made the suggestion at all. With a gesture unmistakably gruff he swept up the prescription-pad on his desk.

"Of course," he said, stiffly, "I did n't intend to suggest anything that would put you out of your way."

Bellsmith was immediately as abject as he had been frightened.

"Doctor," he begged, "you must n't think I would n't be delighted. I was merely thinking what an awful, staid ass I would seem to—to a girl like Miss Marshall."

The doctor was not yet completely mollified, but he saw that the affair could not stop now. Without another word he finished his brief note and handed it to poor Bellsmith.

"The tickets are in my name at the Lyceum Theater," he said shortly. "There is a note to Miss Marshall. If you feel that you can do anything to help her out while she is here this will serve as an introduction. If you can't, don't bother. Come and see me at the same time to-morrow."

He rose very brusquely and began to arrange the chairs in the already perfect office. The consultation was obviously at an end, but Bellsmith stood waiting vaguely, with his hat and coat in his hands, distinctly unhappy. He felt that he had been unconscionably rude and unconscionably silly. Every instinct within him was clamoring to make amends, but the curt, swift movements of the doctor left him no opening. Not at all because it was the best thing to do under the circumstances but merely because he could think of nothing else, he said, "Good night," and fled.

As soon as he had gone the office nurse came silently into the room. She found Dr. MacVickar staring out of the window, over the ugly, meaningless, pebbled roofs of adjacent buildings which dimly bulked in the gathering twilight.

"Will there be anything more to-night, doctor?"

The doctor turned and relapsed immediately into his gentler professional manner.

"Nothing more, thank you, Miss Cowes."

Then, in spite of himself, something more human broke through his crust of restraint. At long intervals, possibly because he knew that she never by any chance understood them, Dr. MacVickar took a grim pleasure in shooting wildly unrelated remarks at Miss Cowes's wholly capable and wholly unimaginative head.

"Miss Cowes," he asked, "how long have you lived in Leicester?"

The blond Diana of a nurse looked at him in surprise.

"Twenty-two years."

"And you still survive?"

Miss Cowes's eyebrows lifted perceptibly. "Why, certainly. I think that Leicester is a very pleasant place, indeed."

Without further explanation the doctor went back to his desk.

"I just want to write a couple of notes. You need n't wait, but before you go please telephone for a messenger-boy. Leave that door open so I will hear him when he comes."

"Yes, certainly, doctor. Good night."

"Good night."

Two minutes later he heard Miss Cowes emerge from her cloak-room into the little hall. Her movements timed by habit to a fifth of a second, he heard her turn the key in her desk, put out the lights in the waiting-room and pick up the tightly rolled umbrella which

she always carried, rain or shine. The outer door closed softly. As if he had been waiting for that final signal, the doctor unscrewed his pen and began the first of his notes:

R. J. Maxley, M. D.,
113 Park Avenue,
New York City.

My dear Doctor:

Your patient, Miss Tilly Marshall, presented your letter on her arrival yesterday and called again to-day. I shall be glad to advise her while in this city and recommend her in turn to some physician in the next town to which her company may move.

Although I have had only two days' acquaintance with the case I agree with you that Miss Marshall's condition of persistent melancholia and habitual nervous fatigue is one which can hardly be permanently relieved so long as it is unfortunately necessary for her to endure the anxieties and inevitable rigors of her profession. The best I can do in such a brief time will be, of course, to reassure her and, if possible, suggest some diversion.

Please do not consider yourself under any obligation to me whatever. Although I have never had the pleasure of meeting you personally I have read with the greatest interest your articles in the *Medical Review*. It has, in fact, been a distinct pleasure to make the acquaintance of your patient, Miss Marshall.

Sincerely yours,
JAMES MACVICKAR.

The other note required a little more thinking.

My dear Miss Marshall:

I wish to thank you again for the seats which Mrs. MacVickar and I were unfortunately unable to use.

I have taken the liberty of giving the tickets to my friend Mr. Arnold Bellsmith and have taken the further liberty of asking him to introduce himself and do what he can to lighten the tedium of your stay in Leicester.

At first acquaintance you may think Mr. Bellsmith the biggest fool ever born, but please take my assurance that actually he is the salt of the earth, and, on further acquaintance, although you may still find him ridiculous, you may also find him, as I do, extremely amusing.

Cordially yours,

JAMES MACVICKAR.

CHAPTER IV

A TYPICAL November evening, tinged with fog and coal smoke, was settling down as Bellsmith pushed into the street in front of the doctor's office. Around him the mottled asphalt, the uneven pavement, the glare of lights from small shops under tenement blocks, before which fat Italians argued and gesticulated, all reflected the sounds and smells of a slowly growing, slowly decaying old Eastern seaboard city.

In the sudden damp chill, Bellsmith gathered his coat around him. His limousine, dimly lighted fore and aft, like a ship at anchor, was waiting dutifully at the curb, but the chauffeur, who was watching with profound amusement three small boys in a quarrel at the head of an alley, was distinctly caught napping. His master's hand was on the door of the car before he was startled out of his preoccupation.

The chauffeur was a cheery, freckled, and broad-faced type of young Irishman. In the early, hysterical days of motoring, he had been a race driver of some modest prominence, but now his chief interest in life was centered on boxing-bouts, which he attended two or three evenings a week and at which he could yowl and heckle to his heart's content. His secret ambition, these days, was to sit officially in a "corner" and wave a bath-towel for some third-rate slugger.

It was a curious but rather attractive commentary on human nature that Bellsmith and Keefe, the chauffeur, were on the best of terms, not only professionally but personally. They were of about the same age, but one would have thought that the rugged, tough, battling Irishman would have looked with supreme contempt on his effete and old-maidish master. As a matter of fact, Keefe had for Bellsmith a hearty respect and something approaching a genuine fondness. The reason lay in the paradoxical fact that they had not one single thing in common. If Bellsmith, like most young men of his class, had tried continually to impress Keefe with his own sage knowledge of cars or of professional sport, the chauffeur would indeed have regarded him with a veiled contempt; but Bellsmith knew nothing of cars, he never expected to know anything of cars, in the presence of an engine he lay inert and helpless. He took everything that Keefe said as supreme law and oracle, and, as a result, Keefe responded like a man and a sportsman. The two lived in separate worlds, and, in his own field, each acknowledged the other's complete supremacy.

Thus it had not chafed Keefe a bit to have been kept waiting for more than two hours, although the return trip home was less than three city blocks. Like Bellsmith himself, Keefe had a sense of fitness which understood plainly enough that certain occasions, such as a trip to the station or a trip to a doctor's office, no matter how short, called inevitably for the etiquette of a car. Besides, it always amused Keefe to work his way through the traffic at this crowded hour between

five and six on a winter evening. The old Bellsmith mansion, behind its tall iron fence, lay in the very heart of the business district of Leicester, the only private residence within a mile of the spot. On one side an office building rose sheer above it. On the other stretched indiscriminate blocks of small shops and tenements. A big department store was only a stone's-throw away. At this hour not only the streets but the sidewalks before the Bellsmith mansion would be packed with shoppers and clerks returning from work. It gave Keefe a fine sense of importance to throw up his hand, turn suddenly, and drive in at the gates through a narrow lane of wide-eyed pedestrians, suddenly blocked in two ranks in their progress and staring amazed at this sight of a huge motor-car coming right up across the sidewalk. At that moment Keefe always felt as if he were driving the chief of police or the President of the United States.

Although only the iron fence, an 1850 affair shaped like a long stand of spears with a battle-ax at the end of each section, separated the old Bellsmith place from the surging tides of pedestrians and from the endless clangor of traffic, yet, once inside the gates, there sprang up a curious sense of seclusion. The lawn was still as religiously tended as if the place were five miles in the country. There were even a few poplar-trees along the brick walls which flanked the grounds at the sides and rear, and geranium-beds, in the shape of a crescent, were ranged round the porte-cochère. In the summer-time Jewish real estate men would stand and gaze longingly through the iron fence and shake their heads at the

thought of what those geranium-beds would mean if translated into terms of ten-story building. In his secluded, self-centered habits, however, Bellsmith was as unconscious of any incongruity in his situation as his father had been before him, when only horse-cars jangled in front of the house and a dozen similar mansions, some three-storied and mansarded like this, some shaped like sandstone Greek temples, could have been found in the eight or ten blocks which, at that time, made up the Main Street of Leicester.

In the porte-cochère Bellsmith left the car and automatically said good night. Then, with a sudden recollection, he turned and added, "Oh, by the way!"

Keefe waited, poised—willing enough but a bit apprehensive. From long association with Bellsmith, Keefe had become almost as keen a psychologist as Dr. MacVickar. He knew that almost by the movement of his shoulders he could throw Bellsmith's decision one way or the other, so, to the honor of Keefe, be it said that he did not move at all. Left to himself in his choice of courses, Bellsmith as usual took the least definite.

"No, never mind," he corrected, apologetically. "It was nothing. I had an idea of going out this evening, but I think I will walk."

Cheerily Keefe touched his visor and whirled the car down toward the brick stable at the foot of the garden. It had been a narrow squeak for him. Two exceedingly likely boys were on the card that evening for the semi-final at the North Side Athletic Club.

Bellsmith himself felt rather relieved at letting the chauffeur go off without obligation. He didn't quite

know even yet how he felt in regard to the evening before him, but by giving no definite orders to Keefe he could still, for another two hours, keep it out of his mind as something improbable and altogether hazy. He turned and walked into the house over an echoing vestibule floor of diagonal blue-and-white tiles and under a square hanging gas-lamp bordered with red-and-green bull's-eyes.

Although, in this leisurely and possibly maddening narrative, it may be necessary to give many descriptions of Arnold Bellsmith and his entourage, none can be more inclusive than the simple statement that the Bellsmith mansion had been the first private house in the City of Leicester to use electricity and yet it still remained the last one to use gas. At a date so far in the past that people came to inspect the wonder, old Colonel Bellsmith had had installed in the very middle of his front hall a tremendous brass plate, fully two feet square, with rows and rows of switches, from which every light in the house could be turned on and off. Nevertheless, thirty-five years later, the square hanging lamps in both the front and side vestibules were still burning gas from old-fashioned, knifebladed jets. Every evening, at five in winter and six in summer, a maid approached with a long, nickel-plated scepter at the top of which were a slot for turning the key of the vestibule lamp and a lighted taper for touching it off. What, one often wondered, would happen if that nickel-plated arrangement should ever be broken or lost? Would there be a shop in the world where another could be obtained?

Or would the maid simply resign and the last hall gas-lamp in Leicester go out forever?

One change, and probably the only change which the growth of the district had induced in the old Bellsmith mansion, had been the necessity of keeping all doors and lower windows invariably locked. Standing on the echoing tiles and under the bull's-eye lamp, Arnold Bellsmith fished automatically for his key, but before he could find it the ponderous inner door, with its silver knob and great brass chain, was opened by William, the butler, not because William had seen him coming but simply because William had happened to be there.

At first thought, one would be inclined to say that William was a false note in the Bellsmith establishment, but on maturer study one would slowly realize that he was the last touch in a superb perfection. William was English, to be sure—Pitkin was his last name,—but he was not at all the majestic, impersonal, yes-me-lud, no-me-lud, majordomo that a superficial taste might have liked to find in the Bellsmith mansion. William was essentially a comedy butler. Like the chauffeur, he had red hair and freckles, but William was undersized, he had one pop-eye, and was generally ridiculous. He would have looked much more in place collecting fares in a trolley-car—on an outlying and insignificant run. His relieving feature was an astonished grin, an incredulous grin, which somehow made the person to whom he was talking share his own utter incredulity at whatever might be the turn of events. If Bellsmith had come in now to announce, "William, the mayor of

Leicester has just been shot," for a moment William's pop-eye would have stared his master out of countenance, then a broad grin would have swept his face, he would have said "Only fawncy!" and a moment later the two together would have been practically roaring at His Honor's absurd predicament. If the truth were known, it had probably been William alone who had, up to this time, saved Bellsmith from insanity or self-destruction.

The most startling feature of William was the fact that he really did know his business—when he chose to display it. This, naturally, was on the rare occasions when there were guests at the Bellsmith house. Then, clothed in a superhuman gravity, although still not without a certain naïve air of astonishment, he would go through the motions of his appointed ritual with a deftness equal to that of any tall Parkins or Admirable Crichton. On such occasions, however, it were well for all who knew him to keep their eyes from him. To all others, his very incongruous appearance seemed to make him appear unusually talented.

On this particular evening no words passed between Bellsmith and William. In fact, William, seeing no occasion for ceremony, merely picked up the evening paper and was half-way down the hall before Bellsmith began to ascend the heavily carpeted stairs, already feeling the unhappy weight of an adventure to which he knew that he was committed but which, for no reason except his dread of commitments in general, he was unwilling to face.

In his dressing-room he dallied and dawdled awhile,

staring out of the window at the flashing lights and surging crowds in the street below him; then, turning, with increasing nervousness and apprehension he began to dress. Below, in the basement kitchen, William began to tease the fat cook and the pretty young parlor-maid, making passes at the latter with the folded newspaper which he still held in his hand. At the foot of the garden Keefe merrily snapped the padlock on the stable door and went up the driveway whistling "Love Nest" in *tempo rubato*, in excellent key and with intricate variations. Out in the street the newsboys kept up an endless, shrill overtone above the dull roar of the traffic: "'Eve—uning Tribune and Press,' 'Leicester Advocate,' last ution!"

Certain questions which Dr. MacVickar had asked that afternoon had been purely formal, for the doctor had known perfectly well the circumstances by which his patient was surrounded. For years Arnold Bellsmith had been the sole possessor of one of those quiet but ponderous fortunes which are found in every New England city, fortunes which have been massed up by nothing more than the simple accumulation of three or four generations and which, in their silent, impregnable bulk, form the despair of eager young business men who are tempted to be exultant in the pride of their first hard-earned and precarious thousands.

The Bellsmiths had always been exceedingly quiet people. Theirs had never figured among the actively fashionable names of Leicester, although among the traditional families their place had always been incontestable. They were one of those families which,

socially, seem to be represented, on the rare occasions when they are represented at all, chiefly by prim, homely, unmarried women, no longer young—women who leave behind them a faint atmosphere of black silk and white gloves. A modest town-councilor or two and one inconspicuous congressman had been, during seventy years, the extent of the Bellsmith participation in public life.

Arnold Bellsmith—he was known as “Young Bellsmith,” and had been for fifteen years and would be for twenty years more—was, in spite of his protestations, rather a shadowy figure, more a name than an actual person, to most of his generation in Leicester, although he had never been absent for more than two years at a time from the huge square, brick house on Main street with its Mansard roof, its iron fence, and its curious anachronistic geranium beds. Abandoned by the steady migration of the residence section toward the west end of the town, that house was now worth, as a commercial site, a considerable fortune in itself, but no one would ever have thought of trying to buy the old landmark. Like its owners, the Bellsmith place had long since been dropped from the commercial possibilities of the city.

Even in the older and smaller days of Leicester, when all the big men of the town had been accustomed to thump their own gold-headed canes down Main Street every morning at nine o'clock, most people could never make the Bellsmith family seem quite real. Although the family wealth had been for fifty years an august and ominous element in half the banks and in-

dustries of the city, yet the curious name had always seemed more or less a myth, a symbol, like "Lloyd's." Some fussy, obsequious lawyer or ponderous, secretive banker had always appeared to represent the Bellsmith family at directors' meetings, and now the blank anonymity of a trust company absorbed all the details of the estate within its broad marble portico.

Compared, indeed, with his forebears, young Arnold Bellsmith was far more widely acquainted but, at the same time, far less known. It was not that he differed greatly from them in intent, but the informalities and gregariousness of modern life no longer permit the extreme type of provincial baron which had been represented by his father and grandfather. One had seldom seen a male Bellsmith of the older generations in the life. For years at a time even the name would practically disappear from the local press until a head of the family died, as one did at frequent intervals, and his estate would come up for probate, at which the bankers and brokers of Leicester would gasp at learning the size to which the estate had grown. Thereupon the name would sink out of sight until another head of the house passed away, and the same thing would occur again.

As usually happens in such cases, one heard of the Bellsmiths more often from outside of Leicester than in it—from New York perhaps, or from Europe or the older summer resorts such as Saratoga. It was common enough for a traveler to say to a Leicester man or a Leicester woman, "By the way, I met some people from your town, not long ago—named Bellsmith."

"Bellsmith?" the Leicester resident would reply.

"Oh, yes, the Bellsmiths. I know who they are, but personally I have never met them."

Even in New York and in Europe and at Saratoga, the older Bellsmiths had always appeared as modestly, albeit as regally, as they had at home. They were people of a type which hotel managers recognized at sight as guests who would make many fussy demands but would pay for everything in immediate and ponderous cash. In those days they had had a regular "beat" of resorts which they covered, in this country and in Europe. In fact, Arnold Bellsmith, the senior, had virtually ceased going to New York when the Fifth Avenue Hotel was torn down. He could not endure the appalling thought of a change. Even the Murray Hill and the Holland House had been unable to console him. This Arnold Bellsmith, the father of the present one, had been a tall, bony man with a huge walrus mustache, who always wore gray spats, a gray cutaway suit, and gray derby hat, with a flat top. Standing, expressionless, on a hotel piazza, he had looked like a cross between a stage duke and an old-time gambler. In reality, under his heavy mustache and his deep bass voice he had the mouse-like soul and the gentle manners of a village music-master. For that was all that there had ever been to the so-called mystery of the Bellsmith family. They were not really haughty or exclusive people, as sometimes they had been accused of being. They were merely timid, apprehensive of all change, mistrusting all innovations, dreading all contacts.

Romance is usually outraged when one attempts to pursue a fact to its actual origin, hotly indignant when

one really succeeds in doing so; but the origin of the attitude held by families like the Bellsmiths is too obvious to be denied. In the days when, paradoxically, new wealth seemed older than old wealth does now, wealth of any kind held itself and was held by others in no small degree of sacredness. At a time when, for all we know, such an inference might well have been justified, the succeeding members of the Bellsmith race were carefully schooled, either actually or by implication, in the obsessing idea that any stranger was a potential adventurer with possible designs less, perhaps, on the Bellsmith money than on the august Bellsmith name. Arnold Bellsmith himself, or his father, for that matter, had probably never heard any such nonsense, but nevertheless the old tradition had done its work and produced a habitual state of mind which still persisted.

Thus Arnold Bellsmith before his windows, taking off his coat and waistcoat one at a time, thus William in the kitchen below now affecting a temporary truce with the parlor-maid, thus Keefe well on his way to the "Baltimore Lunch" for an "egg with," a cup of coffee, and a big cut of pie, and thus the newsboys outside the window still endlessly howling their "Last udition! Last udition!"

CHAPTER V

IN a dressing-room at the Lyceum Theater, Tilly Marshall was making up her eyelashes, while in the corridor outside a tired, slightly snarling voice was droning along in an endless argument consisting, for the most part, of a futile, uninspired, unemphatic sort of profanity.

The whole scene was one which could have been highly ridiculous if there had been any one within range to consider it so, but there were no high spirits in the "Eleanor" company at just that hour, least of all in the dressing-room of Tilly Marshall.

Off the stage, Tilly Marshall was a quiet and pleasantly good-looking girl; on the stage she had a dainty and fragile beauty; but at the present moment scrupulous art could not have succeeded in making her more completely comic. Around her shoulders was a towel streaked with red finger-marks. Above it, her rather thin hair had been drawn viciously back from her forehead and twisted into a knob at the rear of her head, giving her the effect of a faintly pretty but wholly inept little rustic slavey. In her left hand was a black stick of "Cosmétique," not unlike a stick of old-fashioned salve, and on the shelf before her was a lighted candle. At slow and deliberate intervals she would rub the blunt end of a hairpin over the stick

of *Cosmétique*, hold it an instant in the flame of the candle, making the latter splutter and sizzle, then carefully apply the hairpin to her lashes. From this was slowly being evolved what was, at close range, a rather monstrous but, at the same time, rather fascinating result. As she worked, Miss Marshall held her face only three or four inches away from the mirror, her eyes peering into it with that relentless, almost cruel contraction of the pupils common to all women when they study themselves in a glass.

Outside, in the corridor, the tired voice still droned on and on in its dull, monotonous, unaccented profanity, increasing, with every moment, the girl's disgust and depression. It was not the profanity that she minded or, particularly, the owner of the voice, but the whole point of view, the circumstances, which it represented.

The voice was that of Charlie Barnes, the comedian, a wizened little man almost fifty years old, a typical old-time trouser but, oddly enough, in his first season with a "Broadway company." Charlie Barnes was what in the army would be called a "barrack lawyer," and what in theatrical circles is known as a "belly-acher." The word must, unhappily, be used, for there is no other. In every large theatrical company there is one of these internal politicians. Sometimes it is a woman and more often than not the "heavy woman," but in any case it is one of the principals, who finds himself or herself more at home among the members of the chorus than among the other principals, who acts as a go-between for the upper and lower ranks of the company, who may, on rare occasions, be an inval-

uable ally to the management but, more often, is just a trouble-maker, a natural anarchist, and a general nuisance.

In the case of Charlie Barnes there were certain excuses. Too much of his life had been spent in the lower ranks of theatrical life for him to find himself much at home anywhere else, and to an old actor of his type a certain amount of grumbling and querulousness is always allowed as a perquisite.

To Tilly Marshall, Charlie Barnes was professionally merely a type, and personally he was wholly negative. Since he was a man without one atom of breeding it was, perhaps, a point in his favor that he was also a man without one atom of manner, but, curiously enough, although he was a very good comedian, in some respects a highly finished comedian, yet, out of character, he had no real sense of humor. Tilly Marshall herself had a very keen sense of humor. When she was not mentally ill, as she was at the time, she had almost a merciless wit, and, like most young women possessed of this deadly gift, she was all too apt to rate or misrate other people wholly in accordance with its standards. In the case of Charlie Barnes, she could quite easily have overlooked his commonness of person if it had not been for the utter commonness of his mind. As it was, she despised him completely for both. At the present moment, the longer he droned outside her dressing-room door, the more nearly was she beginning to hate him actively, not because he was worse than the rest of her associates in the "Eleanor" company but

because she now saw him to be so hopelessly typical of them all.

Theatrical companies differ as widely in personnel as do ships' companies, and for no greater reason—the law of averages. In five years of stage experience, Tilly Marshall had seen many kinds. In one or two almost the entire membership had been as attractive as the average house-party and far more clever. In most of them there had been at least one or two girls with whom she could be fairly congenial and one or two men who were, at the worst, more or less amusing. Certainly she had never seen a company so uniformly awful as this one.

Technically, this was the most important company with which she had ever played. The musical comedy "Eleanor" was a bona-fide "Broadway show" with the "original cast" still intact, yet many others besides Tilly Marshall had long before this begun to wonder what was the matter with it. Its producers were Harcourt & Gay, a young and vigorous firm which had, within six or seven years shot up to meteoric prominence and which had, up to the present season, had almost a uniform record of huge successes. Its score, libretto, and lyrics had been written by a writer and composer who commanded the highest royalties in their professions. Its principals were all playing parts of a sort in which the public had always acclaimed them. One of them, Charlie Barnes, had been, in a mild way, hailed by one or two critics as the "find" of the year.

"Eleanor" had opened in the city the previous Au-

gust. None of the reviews had been particularly hostile, and most of them had been favorable indeed. After playing two months in New York, the company had withdrawn in perfectly good order and begun its legitimate pilgrimage toward Chicago, but the owners knew perfectly well that the strategic retreat had been merely another name for a rout. They were confident, nevertheless, with that vain and singular confidence so common to men of their profession, that the "provinces" would be either acute enough or stupid enough—they themselves were not sure which they meant—to give them a success where New York had only given them a failure. Up to now, the provinces had returned the same verdict as had New York, but, being only the provinces, had seemed doubly ungrateful to the producers and to the actors for rendering such confirmation.

Naturally the members of the company were not ignorant of the continuous shadow which lay over their progress. The billing, "Fresh from its New York triumphs," did not deceive them, although most of them felt, sulkily enough, that it ought to deceive such cities as Leicester. Dull mentally as most of them were, they were not dull enough to be wholly ignorant of the comparative shallowness of the craft which they were attempting to navigate, but the basis of their resentment rather bears an amazed examination.

Compared, let us say, to "Hamlet" or to "The Merry Widow," both producers and company knew that "Eleanor" was a very superficial effort indeed, but they did not compare it to "The Merry Widow" or "Hamlet." They compared it instead to a long line of

"Eleanors" which had just preceded it—a two or three years' succession of "Hélènes" and "Marjories" and "Janes" which had been produced with immense success for all persons concerned. What exasperated Harcourt & Gay, as it exasperated the company now in the Leicester Lyceum Theater, was the fact that "Eleanor," weak as it was, did not share the rich inheritance of its equally weak predecessors. It seems never to have occurred to any of them that a public which had shown a fondness for pie would not necessarily go on eating pie indefinitely, or, better, that a simple, unexacting class of theater-goers which had been assiduously instructed in dramatic primers might not some time outgrow those very primers and begin to look around for first readers, especially when it began to dawn on them that first readers might really exist. All the members of the "Eleanor" company were endlessly prattling about the insufficiency of their "parts," but none of them seemed to realize the relation between an inadequate part and an inadequate whole.

Even Tilly Marshall, who was being borne down more than all the others by the depression which hung over "Eleanor," gave no real thought to what might be the matter. Superior in mentality as she was to most of her associates, with them she shared the peculiar and helpless fatalism that is characteristic of the theatrical profession. Most theatrical people seem to vision a special and vicious Providence which exists for no other reason than to turn a wheel that shall make one show a success and another a failure. That under these successes and failures must lie certain funda-

mental and self-renewing laws which could be applied, not necessarily with uniform success but in a way which would insure a steady advance, they disregarded as an idea unworthy of a "practical" and cynical profession, one which is founded on intellect but in which intellect is invariably singled out for amused contempt.

Charlie Barnes was the only member of the "Eleanor" cast who made any real effort to find out what might be the matter and, having found it, to preach his doctrine morning, noon, and night. But Charlie Barnes was merely a barrack lawyer, a newly promoted "ham," and no one paid any attention to him except the chorus people, who simply hoped that if they could gain the favor of Charlie Barnes, he might speak a word for them when any new "bits" were given out or when the cast might be reduced in numbers. The other principals hopped and smirked at performances, apparently with a rare zest, but between performances, they sat and gloomed. They were Maida Maine, the Junoesque prima donna around whom the show had been built; Adrian Bellony, the technical "hero," a tin-faced man who should have been driving a truck and would have been if nature had not endowed him with one of those metallic and piercing tenor voices which galleries are supposed to adore; Tommy Knight, an eager enough Irish-American boy—a beady-eyed dancer; Elsie Winner, a straw-blond theatrical type who, with Tilly Marshall shared the two equal sou-brette parts; Tilly Marshall herself; and, lastly, old Celestine Trip, a comedy woman of two hundred pounds who played a dowager part, technically "opposite"

Charlie Barnes. "Fifty-eight people" were advertised to travel with the "Eleanor" company, but to secure this impressive total the electrician and the stage-hands were all counted. The seven above mentioned were all who were of any particular concern to the public or to themselves.

For fifteen minutes Tilly Marshall remained with her face held rigidly in front of the mirror, completing her make-up and doing her hair; then, simultaneously, occurred two events of some slight psychological importance. In the corridor the droning voice ceased abruptly, leaving a distinctly appreciated feeling of peace. At the same moment Tilly Marshall removed the grimy towel from her shoulders. The effect was magical, even to her. Her dress still hung in front of a sheet on the wall, but her appearance was not materially different from what it would be a few minutes later. Looking into her mirror she realized—not without genuine surprise in her present embittered mood of self-depreciation—that she was amazingly pretty. For a moment, more under the dictates of her mood than genuinely, she tried to sneer at herself for the sudden slight exultation that her appearance gave her, but, irresistibly, she felt happier than she had for days and, after a moment, ceased to combat the respite from her depression. Suddenly feeling, not a distaste, but an anticipation for the performance ahead of her, she turned and took her blue first-act gown from its hooks.

In the corridor outside various steps and swishings now brushed back and forth. In the dressing-room next to hers Tilly Marshall heard voices and knew that the

mulatto woman who acted as dresser for all the women principals in the company except the star would come to her next. She sat down and waited. A momentary silence settled down over the corridor; then a heavy irregular step came thumping along and there was a knock at her door.

Whether or not he actually had one, the stage-doorkeeper of the Lyceum Theater walked as if he had a wooden leg. In the two days' residence of the "Eleanor" company, Tilly Marshall had already become familiar with his *thump, thump, thump*, and she opened the door without hesitation. The man handed her a note, at which she stared in surprise.

"Is there any answer?" she asked instinctively.

The doorman grinned. "I don't know, Miss. That's probably for you to say."

Tilly Marshall flushed crimson to the edges of her gown, which still hung, unhooked, over her shoulders. The thought in the doorkeeper's mind had been the farthest from her own, and she was rather chilling in her dignity as she took the note and tore it open. One glance was sufficient to show her that the envelope contained nothing but a sparse, flimsy prescription-sheet from Dr. MacVickar. She turned and nodded to the man. "No answer."

The doorman still stood rubbing his head for a moment and grinning whimsically, then turned and thumped away down the corridor like *Long John Silver*. Tilly Marshall closed the door and resumed her seat, but not without a certain vague disappointment.

Like all women who had ever met him, especially

those who would never in the world have thought of marrying him, Tilly Marshall had at first sight voted Dr. MacVickar a "dear." Her second consultation with him, that afternoon, had increased this feeling, but she had to admit that, for one wild second, in her sudden good humor, she had expected something more exciting than the prescription which he had promised that afternoon to send to her hotel and which had apparently been forwarded to her from there.

Nevertheless a doctor's prescription was better than nothing, and she took the flimsy little sheet idly from its envelope, prepared to see what Dr. MacVickar had to say about B Bro 2XX and Sulph Carb NZ. To her pleased surprise the sheet was not an order on a pharmacy at all but a personal note, and, taking it to the light by the mirror, she glanced it through eagerly:

My dear Miss Marshall:

.....
.....
....first acquaintance you may think Mr. Bellsmith the biggest fool ever born but please take my assurance.....
.....
.....

The door was silently opened and the mulatto woman entered. Without a word, she began to hook up Miss Marshall's gown while the girl read the letter to its end. She looked up into the mirror and again was surprised to see her own eyes dancing with gaiety. After all, it *was* a pleasant surprise. She had known that something amusing was about to happen. She did not,

of course, take the doctor's description of Arnold Bellsmith at its face-value. Indeed she was quite prepared to believe that that was the doctor's gruff masculine method of preparing her to meet an unusually attractive man.

Suddenly the inevitable thought came to her. Could this Mr. Bellsmith be the man she had seen at the office that afternoon? At once she hoped that it was, for he too had looked quite a "dear." She tried to remember the exact location of the seats which she had reserved for the doctor. "H, 6 and 8"—she was sure those were the ones—"H, 6 and 8 right," but, like all stage people, she was, for the moment, compelled mentally to face backward in order to visualize their location, for "right" on the stage and "right" in the house are the exact opposites. She must remember—eighth row, on the aisle, on her own left hand.

The dresser swiftly and silently completed her work and prepared to leave. Among all the women whom she attended Miss Marshall caused her the least trouble, although, poor thing, she could hardly know that this was because Miss Marshall could hardly bear to have her touch her.

"Is there anything more, Miss Marshall?"

The dresser had to repeat the question before the girl came out of her preoccupation.

"No, thank you, Francie."

The dresser slipped out, leaving the door wide open. A moment later the assistant stage-manager came bustling through the corridor, stopping before each door and announcing:

“Overture and beginners!”

Tilly Marshall put down the note and turned instinctively toward the door, although her first entrance would not come until after the second number. At the end of the corridor she could hear the members of the chorus pushing and scuffling down the iron circular staircase, and, far in the distance, like the dimmed horns of a circus band, could be heard the opening notes of the orchestra. Darkness, then lights, began to succeed each other in the wings of the stage, finally settling into a warm steady glow which came in beams through the openings in the scenery. As Tilly Marshall came into the wings, rough shapes could be seen in the dark spaces peering through the gaps at the stage. “A rotten house,” she heard some one say: then there was a sudden instant of absolute silence. A harsh voice called something from the regions above. The music was again audible. In a ragged, hesitant way the chorus began to sing. There was a slow, crinkling sound. The instrumental music became suddenly very loud, and a wave of warm, hot-house air swept over the stage to where Tilly Marshall was standing.

The curtain was up. On with the play!

CHAPTER VI

THE first requisite of a high-class theater is, apparently, an unspeakable alley running to the stage-door. An alley seems to stand to a theater in the same relation that a power-site does to a mill or a harbor to a dock, the rule being, first find your alley, measure it carefully to see that it is narrow enough and dark enough and dirty enough, then, being sure of your facts, go ahead and build. This is probably a recognized principle among theatrical architects. There have, no doubt, been theaters with stage-doors on open streets and on clean parkways, but they have never succeeded and have soon been changed into "movie" houses, for which, of course, no stage-door is required.

In this respect the Leicester Lyceum Theater was highly orthodox, and as Arnold Bellsmith stood nervously at the head of its alley after his guest performance of "Eleanor," the alley had at least the virtue of coming up to his worst expectations.

Until, indeed, the theater crowd had melted entirely away, until only the policeman and half a dozen hangers-on remained, Bellsmith did not even dare to approach the alley at all. For several minutes he stood on the corner, fumbling in his pockets, lighting an unwanted cigarette, and giving, generally, a correct imitation of a man-about-town waiting for friends. When,

however, a stage-hand came whistling cheerfully up the alley and then two or three girls in fur coats, Bellsmith gritted his teeth and turned, trembling slightly, on his fearsome errand. It was now or never.

Like a good Bellsmith he had made his preparations minutely. In his overcoat pocket, in fact clutched in his hot, dry hand, was a dollar bill—this for the Cerberus whom tradition had placed at the stage-door. Bellsmith wanted to have that bill ready at hand, where he could reach it quickly, if necessary, in order to forestall a snub or an oath. He had also in his overcoat pocket a card on the back of which was a note worded as nearly as possible in just the right balance of lightness and formality. In brief it asked Miss Marshall exactly what Dr. MacVickar had suggested that he ask—whether a supper and possibly a dance or two might not lighten the tedium of her stay in Leicester,—but this note in itself had been only the final masterpiece of a dozen discarded attempts all written furtively in the hollow of his hand in the semi-darkness of the auditorium while the two acts of “Eleanor” were progressing. That even this one had survived had been due to the fact that no more cards remained in Bellsmith’s pocket-book. The others, the rough drafts, he found months later, to his huge amusement, in a little-used pocket of his dinner-jacket.

But now for the alley. At the other side of the narrow passageway from the theater was a third-class restaurant (this again being a prime requisite of theatrical architecture), and on both sides the towering, windowless, shabby brick walls were lined with galvanized iron

ash cans, those on the theater side overflowing with abandoned show-bills, those on the restaurant side overflowing with garbage. If this was vice, thought Bellsmith, it certainly was not gilded.

Half-way down the alley there appeared a grating and a shaft of light from the restaurant side, and as he passed it Bellsmith was swept by an overpowering wave of warm, kitchen air saturated with the odors of boiling coffee. Within he saw an immense Italian chef with an opera mustache and a filthy apron but with the inevitable white cap of his trade on his head. In an instant of nervous whimsy it came to Bellsmith as a novel and remarkable idea, that even a third-class restaurant had to have a chef. Where did such chefs come from, he wondered, and what, eventually, became of them? Did they go up or down from that stage of their profession? What would happen if he should step into that kitchen and ask for *pâté à la reine*? Would the chef throw a meat cleaver at him or would he burst into tears?

But one dim light now remained ahead of him down the alley—the stage-door itself. This was a hooded little aperture resembling nothing so much as the door of a farm-house kitchen and presenting an aspect quite as wind-swept and lonely. It was still bathed to a certain extent in the hot coffee odor of the restaurant but added to it a dry, musty smell of its own.

No scientist has yet determined just what creates that not agreeable yet not particularly disagreeable smell peculiar to the back stage of a theater, but all playhouses have it, from the Town-hall in Dog Foot, Idaho, to La Scala in Milan. New theaters acquire it before they are

really completed; old theaters never lose it. It is something built in with the bricks and mortar, and Arnold Bellsmith was to become very familiar with that smell before his present adventure was over.

Bellsmith clutched tightly his dollar bill and knocked furtively at the hooded doorway. There was no response and he knocked again, knocked and waited. A hearty, brisk-stepping man came past him from lower down in the alley, looked at Bellsmith curiously, then asked, in a friendly way:

"Ain't there no one there? Then go ahead in."

The man passed on and Bellsmith pulled tentatively at the door. Working on a sash weight and pulley, it responded suavely to his touch and slammed immediately after he had passed through, leaving Bellsmith to stand gulping at the foot of three steps and wonder what to do next. Still no one accosted him or demanded a countersign, and Bellsmith ascended the three steps to the single light which burned at the head of the dressing-room corridor.

Down this corridor he could hear low muffled sounds of voices and moving around. Immediately in front of him loomed the huge black space of the stage, with the flimsy "set" of the last act still standing, while from empty, echoing spaces beyond it came a regular, clanking sound as of a man throwing scantling upon a pile.

A door down the corridor opened, and a little man in a snuff-colored suit with a brown derby hat on the side of his head came sauntering down the passage looking around belligerently. It was Charlie Barnes, the old trouper, always the last man in the company to begin

dressings and the first to be through. At sight of Bellsmith he stopped suddenly, eyed him cockily, and his lips almost framed a sentence. At the least encouragement, probably, Charlie Barnes would have stopped and picked up his tale of woe exactly where he had left it before the performance. All he wanted was an auditor, any auditor, but Bellsmith, recognizing the comedian even without his make-up, knew that he could play no part in his present adventure and stared straight before him. After eying him a moment Barnes returned to his dressing-room, came back with an overcoat over his arm, and went out into the alley.

A moment later the mulatto maid came through the corridor. About this maid in her black dress and white cuffs there was something nearer to the scope of Bellsmith's experience, and he stopped her.

"I beg your pardon," he began. "Could you take a note to Miss Tilly Marshall?"

The maid stared at him coldly for a moment, then held out her hand for the card and the dollar bill which she took without thanks and as a perfect matter of course. She passed down the corridor to the third or fourth door and almost immediately came back with a manner entirely changed.

"Miss Marshall," she announced in a round, smooth voice, which she had copied from prima donnas, "says thank you very much and she will be out immediately."

The maid passed on her original errand up the circular iron staircase, while Bellsmith, shifting uneasily, resumed his vigil. He wandered a few steps out on the darkened stage, peered in through the gaps in the flies,

then, returning to his original post, stood nervously waiting.

Charlie Barnes, however, had been, as usual, a correct harbinger, and other signs of life now began to spring up around Bellsmith. From the last door of the corridor the tenor-hero came smoking a big cigar, with him a gaudily dressed but not unpleasant young man whom Bellsmith again recognized as Tommy Knight, the juvenile lead and dancer. At sight of Bellsmith, the young man, like Barnes, paused automatically for a fraction of a second, then, seeing his mistake, nodded good-naturedly and passed on.

A moment later there was a giggle and scamper on the iron staircase and a group of chorus girls came circling down it. For some reason (again unknown to science) there is always in every musical comedy company, one chorus girl who is half a head taller than all the rest. She is never a very good dancer and never particularly pretty, but she is always there, always working just a little harder than any of the others, always giving somewhat the effect of an older child in a primary class, and always, by the sheer false note of her height, catching the eye of the audience and holding it willy-nilly.

In the group which now came giggling and circling down the staircase this girl was, true to type, in the van. As if speaking for all the others, she too threw at Bellsmith an open, humorous stare, not offensively bold yet certainly not unfriendly. Probably she expected no response and, getting none, passed out of the swinging and banging door at the head of her bevy, a rather pathetic

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group of young women, most of them little more than children, none of them very well dressed except two trim, tailored Jewish girls with good imitations of expensive furs, big, expressionless eyes, sleek hair, and sharply penciled eyebrows.

After them came more chorus-girls, very much like the others, who stopped, with giggling, school-girl remarks, to read some notice posted on the call-board. Before them and after them came sauntering men of the chorus in twos and threes, some of them boys of eighteen and nineteen with thin, gesticulating hands and cheaply handsome, vacuous faces, others men of thirty to forty with hard, twisted mouths, gold teeth, and surly defiant manners. The younger men were invariably well dressed, except for some one feature which was invariably wrong—cloth-top shoes or a plush hat. The older men were invariably shabby. At a moment when the little space before the call-board was crowded there came a sudden hush. Glancing behind him Bellsmith saw a tremendous figure in a fur coat billowing down the corridor. It was Maida Maine, the leading woman. Her nose in the air, looking neither to left nor to right and followed at two paces by her own colored maid, she swept through the ranks which had parted to give her room. No one looked at her as she passed, but the moment the outside door had closed behind her some chorus man made a shrill, squawking noise of derision, and the whole group burst into laughter.

A moment later the place was empty again, and Bellsmith began glancing anxiously down the corridor. Then

slowly the door of a dressing-room opened and Tilly Marshall was coming toward him. After the noise and cheapness of the chorus she was a singularly dramatic study in quietness and good breeding. She wore, as she had in the doctor's office, a blue tailored suit with an inconspicuous hat, and her face had no trace of make-up. Bellsmith cleared his throat and stepped nervously forward, but, without waiting for him, the girl, with perfect naturalness, held out her hand.

"How do you do, Mr. Bellsmith?"

As Bellsmith took her hand the girl regarded him with a curious unswerving look, her eyes opening very wide. If this trait of Tilly Marshall's had ever been studied it was wholly instinctive now, and it was an expression that one never forgot. Bellsmith, for his part, found himself feeling suddenly more awkward than ever under that searching, unwavering gaze, and he began groping for words; but Miss Marshall, dropping his hand, burst into a laugh.

"Then it *was* you," she said, "after all?"

Bellsmith returned her look, possibly appearing more puzzled than he actually was, but it was a perfectly legitimate manœuvre and the girl explained:

"I mean in the doctor's office this afternoon—Dr. What 's-his-name—I quite love him—I 've got his name on a bottle." She smiled again. "You know when I got his note I wondered whether it would be you."

All this, it seemed to Bellsmith, had taken hours. He felt like a man who is making a speech and suddenly wonders whether he has said a word, but apparently,

like a dream, it had only taken a fraction of a second, for Miss Marshall's smile was still on her lips and she went on:

"I thought afterward that you would think me a horrible hussy for smiling at you there in the doctor's office, but really I mistook you at first for the doctor himself."

"And I," laughed Bellsmith, with sufficient truth for all practical purposes, "took *you* for some one else. At least I was sure that I had seen you before. As I had—" he added a second later "—in 'Miss Mischief.'"

"Oh—that!" answered the girl, her voice suddenly losing all interest. She turned toward the door. "Shall we go along?"

Out in the alley the girl took his arm but dropped it as soon as they reached the street, whether to Bellsmith's relief or to his regret he was not at all certain.

In front of the theater they paused while Bellsmith looked around wildly.

"I'll see whether I can get a taxi," he began, but the girl interrupted him.

"What nonsense!" she said. "Can't we walk?"

"That's what I should do myself," admitted Bellsmith, "but where would you like to go? There is some kind of dancing at both of the hotels, or perhaps—"

"I don't feel very much like dancing," replied Miss Marshall.

Already, as Bellsmith was noticing, she had a sudden way of taking things completely into her own hands and making him feel curiously young.

"Is n't there some place," she asked, "where we can just sit and talk?"

"Why, certainly," agreed Bellsmith. He, too, had been in terror of trying to dance with a professional. He debated. "There is the Stansfield and then there is the Massapauk."

"I 'm stopping at the Massapauk," replied the girl. "Would n't it be simpler to go there?"

"By all means," said Bellsmith, and they turned to walk up toward Main Street.

The Stansfield was the newest and by far the best hotel in Leicester. Bellsmith had for some minutes been planning to do the honors there in a more sumptuous manner than he would be able to do at the more modest Massapauk, but still—all things considered— Well, probably it *was* just as well to go to the Massapauk.

CHAPTER VII

ALTHOUGH the dowdy old Massapauk, with its carpeted halls and its creaking rope lift, had completely lapsed into second-rateness under the shadow of its mightier rival, the Stansfield, it liked to cherish the wholly unfounded illusion that it still held the affections of the "conservative element," which had driven to it in traps and victorias in the days of its glory. Years before, the whole Bellsmith tribe—colored valet, ladies'-maids, old aunts, and all, a company of never less than eight or ten souls—had been accustomed, once every year, to descend upon the Massapauk in a majestic caravan headed, patriarchally, by Arnold Bellsmith the senior and remain there for two or three weeks to escape the nervous ordeal of spring cleaning with its accompanying horrors of scaffoldings and plasterers. It had become almost a rite, a gracious official sojourn, but Arnold Bellsmith had now hardly been inside the place for three or four years and, at sight of him, the old head waiter greeted him with an amazed enthusiasm that was almost pathetic.

It was an enthusiasm that was not lost on Tilly Marshall, and as they passed into the dining-room, with its old steel-engravings and its wooden electric fans like propeller-blades hung permanently from the chandeliers, she stole another and more critical glance at her companion. It had not occurred to her previously to wonder

particularly who or what he might be, beyond the doctor's assurance that he might prove amusing and beyond her own hope that he might offer some slight variation to the most dismal succession of months she had ever known in her life. Locating him furtively beyond the footlights during the performance, she had stamped him, by his sleek head and sober dinner-coat, as belonging to the "rising young lawyer type" that she saw incessantly in provincial audiences. His slow and embarrassed but somehow unshakable and authoritative way of speaking in their few brief minutes after the performance had completely dispelled that impression. She had then formed one of those unreasoning but remarkably accurate intuitions that he had something to do with a library. The general words "book-plates" and "prints" had begun to associate themselves with the image she had of him in her mind, but, while head waiters have, no doubt, a decent respect for book-plates, she saw now by the reception accorded Bellsmith at the Massapauk that even her second impression could be true only in some widely associated sense. Oddly enough, the head waiter's attitude prepared her not for the best but for the worst.

"Tell me," she said suddenly, as soon as they were seated and their order given (to the august paternal pad of the head waiter himself), "you don't, by any chance, manufacture commercial fertilizers? Or plumbing supplies?"

Bellsmith looked up at her utterly aghast.

"Commercial fertilizers?" he echoed. "What do you mean?"

The girl laughed. "You must n't mind me if I am impertinent, but I could n't help seeing, by the way the head waiter treated you, that you are some one important. That's Clue No. 1. Then, when you began to talk there by the dressing-rooms I got the idea that you were a student or a tutor or an artist or something of that kind. That's Clue No. 2, but I have always found that when a man looks like an artist it means that he is a horse-dealer and when he looks like a horse-dealer it means that he is a man-milliner. That's Clue No. 3. So I reason it out that, as you look like a scholar or an artist but as head waiters seem to respect you I must be prepared to face the fact that you make plumbing supplies. Now do you see what I mean?"

Bellsmith smiled faintly. "Yes, I see," he replied; and somewhat to her amazement, for it must be frankly admitted that, with the fine intellectual intolerance of her kind, she had deliberately set out to play over his head, the girl realized that he really did see perfectly.

"No," added Bellsmith, a moment later, "I'm sorry, but I've never manufactured a single plumbing supply in my life—not one."

The girl waited rather eagerly for him to go on but, with that timid and innocent yet maddeningly unshakable way of his, he merely looked back at her with equal expectancy and, because she had thrown herself into the wrong in the first place, his endurance could naturally be longer than hers.

"Well?" she demanded abruptly.

Again it amazed her (for the first reply might have been an accident) and wholly increased her respect for

him that he made no attempt to fence. "What *do* I do?" he suggested simply. "In lieu of plumbing supplies or commercial fertilizers?"

"Exactly," replied the girl, "since the truth must out."

Bellsmith looked down at the menu-card which he held in his hand and blushed uncomfortably.

"I don't do anything," he answered.

Again, for a moment, as if both of them were trying to see which could hold a breath the longest, they sat in that uncomfortable, expectant silence. It lasted almost a minute, and then the girl exploded in complete defeat.

"You're the most astounding man I ever saw," she exclaimed. "I gave you at least thirty seconds to say it and you did n't."

"Say what?" asked Bellsmith.

The girl made a quick gesture. "You said that you did n't do anything—no work, no career, no nonsense of that kind,—but I was betting mentally ten to one that in another minute you would add something about being ashamed of it or about yours being a useless kind of existence or about having 'plans in the works,' and you did n't say a thing of the kind. You just plain loaf. Is that it?"

Bellsmith looked up in mild astonishment. "And why should n't I? Why should I want to work?"

The girl gave up hopelessly. "I know that you *are* a professor or something unreal of that kind. I don't want you to be, but anything else is too good to be true."

Yet, curiously, there was no glint of humor in Bell-

smith's eyes as again he looked down at his menu-card. "Don't you want me to do nothing at all?" he asked quietly.

"Oh, bless you, yes!" answered the girl quickly, "but I just could n't believe it; that's all."

Without explanation both fell into a somewhat languid silence, while a subordinate waiter busied himself for a moment with glasses of ice water and rolls. It was the kind of silence that Bellsmith liked. He imagined possibly that the girl liked it too, but, as the silence continued long after the waiter had left, he felt impelled to say something, at least from good will. He laid down the menu-card and moved a glass.

"Do you shoot people," he asked slowly, "who say, at moments like this, 'I think two people can understand each other better when they're silent than when they are talking'?"

The girl looked at him in incredulous delight. "I do," she answered. "I shoot them at sight."

"That's nice," replied Bellsmith, "because, you know, I should have had to shoot you a minute ago if you had said, 'A penny for your thoughts'!"

The girl made no reply. She now was looking down, and for a moment Bellsmith almost thought she was angry. Could it be possible—it could n't—that she had actually been on the point of saying just that? He studied the top of her hat as it was bowed toward him. There was dust in the folds of the ribbon, and he wondered that a person as meticulous as she could have overlooked that, but it made her curiously and rather dearly human. Then, slightly, she changed her position,

and he saw that her eyes were brimming with tears.

Nothing had ever given Bellsmith the quick shock through his whole body that was given him by the sight of those tears. He looked gruffly away; then, when he thought that he had given her a decent interval, he cautiously looked back again. The girl was now staring straight before her, but the tears were still in her eyes and she made no attempt to conceal them.

"Oh! I 'm a fool!" she exclaimed, "but, thank heaven, you will never know what I was crying about."

But she herself knew that that statement did not ring true, and she added, almost with a grudging anger, "*Or do you know what I am crying about? I suppose by some insane chance you do know exactly.*"

Bellsmith looked down, fiery red. "Without any of the usual apologies for which you would shoot me," he said in a very low voice, "you find it rather agreeable to be with white people, to talk English—once more."

He looked at her cautiously, hesitating at his daring, but she was choking now. With a quick, almost incongruously feminine movement, she began fumbling hastily in her hand-bag for a handkerchief and, when she found it, without any concealment at all, she dabbed her eyes. His own remark she either forgot or left wholly untouched. She smiled in a way that was meant to be obviously and conventionally forced.

"Please do remember that I really have been sick for months," she said harshly and rapidly. "That 's why I had to go to see Dr. What 's-his-name. Now quick! Say some obvious anticlimax before we two idiots sob on each other's shoulders."

Bellsmith, who had been looking at her alarmed, but merely because he feared that she might break down physically, smiled wryly.

"Anticlimax?" he asked. "That's easy. I've had one in mind for some time. Where in the world did you get such a horrible name as 'Tilly'? Is it really your name?"

The girl laughed with relief. "Thank you! That's just what I wanted. Tilly? My real name? No, it's not. It's Helen. The 'Marshall' is genuine."

Bellsmith, in his life, had never known moments like these—whimsical moments such as he lived by the hour in his own lonely reveries but had never dreamed could be shared with any one. At his own success he was like a man who had never known that he could box but was having a dream in which he was amazed to discover that he was a champion—Dempseys and Sharkeys collapsing before him. He heard himself going on and on.

"But if you had to *pick* a name," he continued, "why not 'Arbutus' or 'Pearl'? Those are, if anything, worse."

"I know it," said the girl, "but I couldn't help it. 'Tilly' was wished on me in the first show I was ever in. A man named Fred Winckle was directing it, and he said that 'Helen Marshall' sounded nondescript, like a little school-girl with a red bow. He was a great admirer of Vesta Tilly, so he just put me down as 'Tilly Marshall' on the program. I didn't know anything about it until I saw it, but it's stuck ever since and I don't know that he was n't right. For instance, you

could n't think of me now as named Helen Marshall if you tried. Honestly, could you?"

Bellsmith shook his head. "Oddly, I could n't. And it 's funny, too. I almost think I like 'Tilly' the best."

The girl retorted automatically, "But you said you thought 'Tilly' a horrible name."

"Shoot!" snapped Bellsmith quickly.

The girl blushed. "You 're quite right. Yes, you must shoot me. Ready! Aim! By the way, it would shock you, would n't it, if I should say, 'I now proceed to bare my breast'?"

"Yes, I think it would," admitted Bellsmith.

"That 's good," said the girl. "I hoped it would. But," she added, "it 's always understood, is n't it, that I can say 'I am now going to murder my mother' or 'damn' or things like that and there won't be any shock at all?"

"Yes, that 's understood perfectly," replied Bellsmith.

And possibly there was something said after that—there must have been,—but if there was neither of them remembered it. All that either of them *did* remember was suddenly finding themselves staring into each other's eyes, the girl's eyes opened wide with that searching unswerving look that Bellsmith had first seen in her, Bellsmith's own eyes incredulous and frightened. Before his mind began suddenly tumbling a riotous procession of all the things that the Bellsmiths did think about in crises—the majestic form of old Bellsmith senior, the prim, unrelenting mouth of old Aunt Lucille, the ponderous, unchanging house on Main Street, the fat and efficient little banker with a round stomach and

a beard like King Edward's who always came in when danger threatened the family and said, "Well, now; well, now."

At the same time, gradually crowding out even these pictures, there swept over him that weakening, frightening, caving-in feeling that had stabbed him when he had seen the girl's tears. He had never known that emotion before, but he knew that he recognized it. Under the table his hands were gripping each other and his forearms were trembling.

Then suddenly, as if in lieu of the fat family banker and guardian, the old head waiter came bustling up with a steaming chafing-dish and—dear, old soul—the beaming feeling that he was doing a kindly thing.

As if coming out from a dream world, a state in which he had been held for hours, Bellsmith suddenly heard the clatter and noise of the dining-room starting up around him and made out shapes of men and women leaning over tables, talking nonchalantly. Looking across the table he saw the girl watching him with amused, understanding eyes.

"I'm glad you didn't ask me," she said quietly.

"Why?" asked Bellsmith.

"I don't know," said the girl, "and I don't want to know. I think it is because I still want it ahead of me."

CHAPTER VIII

A SUDDEN expectant movement on the part of the head waiter and a rapid pattering of his fat little feet drew several pairs of eyes, including Bellsmith's, to the door of the dining-room, where a girl in a gray dress and hat with high cheek-bones and masses of straw blonde hair had appeared, looking over the room.

Bellsmith called his companion's attention. "Isn't that one of—one of your friends in the doorway?"

Miss Marshall glanced around indifferently.

"Yes," she said, without interest; "Elsie Winner."

She turned, unconcerned, back to the table, but her one look had been enough to establish a connection. Instantly the face of the girl in the doorway lightened and she came toward them, the head waiter, beaming and fatherly, in her train. Any one remotely connected with Bellsmith had his entire devotion this evening. Poor Jules, or Jacques, or whatever his name might have been! Like most of us he lived daily in the vain hope of reanimating the past.

If Miss Marshall, however, had been indifferent to the new-comer in the abstract, she was cordial enough as the girl reached the table. "Hello!" she said brightly. "Looking for me?"

The other girl laughed. "No," she replied, "I just came down to ask you how to spell 'Newark.' "

Miss Marshall, unlike most imperious tempers, was at least a good loser, and she joined in the laugh.

"Sit down, Elsie," she said, "and we'll tell sad stories of the death of kings. Mr. Bellsmith, Miss Winner."

Bellsmith had been standing, very erect and self-conscious under the eyes of the dining-room. He acknowledged the introduction with a formal nod, while Miss Winner took him in with a swift, appraising glance not unlike that of the chorus girl on the circular stairway—a look which lost no detail yet was not unfriendly. Jules or Jacques, meantime, was eagerly holding a chair just behind her knees so that, if she should happen to unbend in the least degree, behold! she would find herself seated. Surely a head waiter could do no more.

Without much attention however to either of them, Miss Winner turned swiftly to Tilly Marshall.

"No, thank you, Tilly," she continued hurriedly. "I can't sit down. I was sent to look for you. Tommy Knight's giving a birthday party. Had n't you heard about it?"

"No," answered Miss Marshall eagerly, "I had n't heard a thing."

Without knowing why, Bellsmith knew this to be a lie; but apparently it deceived Miss Winner, for she continued with the forced and unconvincing enthusiasm that precedes every party for persons over twelve. "The whole bunch are there, but they didn't want to begin without you. They've been looking everywhere for you. There are—shall I say—distilled spirits?"

Miss Marshall smiled. "Naturally. I can't somehow

picture Tommy Knight celebrating a birthday party with lady fingers. Where is it?"

"In a private dining-room," prattled on Miss Winner, more and more the eager but consciously hollow promoter of gaiety. "Can't you come somehow? They're waiting for you."

Bellsmith interposed politely. "By all means," he said, "if you want to go, don't let me—"

But both girls objected at once. "Oh, you must come too," begged Miss Winner. "The more the merrier."

Miss Marshall looked up at him in lazy speculation, as if it had been for years an understood thing that they should spend all their spare time together. "Do you feel like going?" she asked.

"Just as you say," insisted Bellsmith, with the perfect neutrality which the scene demanded.

"All right, then," said Miss Marshall, gathering her gloves. "Let's on."

Then quickly she remembered the supper which they had just begun and pointed to the plates before them.

"Are there certain attendant ceremonies—?" she began, but Jules, who had been standing six feet away, quivering like a jack-rabbit in his eagerness, took in the situation instantly and leaped to brush aside any potential check.

"Oh! that's all right, Mr. Bellsmith," he urged. "Never mind that!"

Miss Marshall rose and the three turned to go, while Jules purred over them all.

"Shall I sign for you?" he suggested.

"Will you, please?" asked Bellsmith, absently.

It was one of the few things that he had said naturally and unconsciously all the evening, and again there was something in his tone that made Miss Marshall turn cautiously and study him keenly; but she said nothing and, with an advance-guard of Miss Winner and a rear-guard of Jules, each equally pleased with the mission, they left the dining-room.

At the doorway, nevertheless, Miss Marshall held back and drew closer to Bellsmith.

"I hope," she said in a low voice, "that I have n't dragged you into anything that you did n't want to do. I did n't want to go a bit, myself, but, honestly, I did n't like to offend them."

"Oh, not at all," Bellsmith assured her. "I 'd really like to go. Of course—" But at the same instant their eyes met, and in the girl's eyes was a flickering, unabashed humor. Neither said any more.

Behind their guide, Miss Winner, they crowded into the little, old-fashioned elevator. The boy in charge pulled down some six or eight yards of rope, before the thing would start at all. Then, imperceptibly, they rose in the brass-grilled cage, giving the traveling men in the lobby a prolonged, interminable look at their knees and feet as they were slowly absorbed into the ceiling. Up one story they halted opposite a wooden door, which the boy threw open grandly.

"Sss-ecund floor!" he shouted, as if there had been a dozen of them there in the elevator, all bound for different terminals.

With the sure air of one on familiar ground, Miss Winner went padding down the carpeted hall, which

was lighted largely by red fire-lamps, followed by Miss Marshall and Bellsmith, both drawing slightly together and both feeling a little like naughty children on an illicit errand. There is nothing like an old-fashioned hotel to give this feeling. In the distance a chambermaid vanished around a corner. Odd, thought Bellsmith, that one never meets a chambermaid coming. They are always just vanishing at the end of the hall.

At a door with brass numerals nailed to the panels Miss Winner knocked softly. From within, a dim murmur of voices could be heard, interrupted occasionally by a shout of laughter, but, over their heads, the wooden transom was closed and no streaks of light came out around it. Miss Marshall and Bellsmith had now overtaken their guide, and the three stood waiting in the half darkness, in what was, again, a ridiculous, child-like silence.

Miss Winner repeated her knock more imperiously and a voice inside could be heard shouting, "Hey, there! There's somebody at the door!"

Instantly the voices were silent. The door was opened cautiously for two inches, then, with a shout, flung wide open, and they entered the room.

It was Tommy Knight, in lavender shirt-sleeves, with a bartender's apron tied over his chest, who had admitted them. As if he had seen neither of the girls for weeks he cordially shook hands with each of them in turn. "Good work, Winnie! Oh, hello, Miss Marshall! So they found you, did they? Come on in. Come in."

As Miss Marshall passed in, she turned to introduce Bellsmith.

"Mr. Knight, Mr. Bellsmith."

The host gravely wiped his hand on his apron. "Glad to see you, Mr. Bellsmith," he said, and the two men shook hands very formally.

The "private dining-room" could apparently be either a dining-room or a bedroom, according to which office was most in demand, for an oak folding bed, in a creditable imitation of a wardrobe, with a large mirror in its face, stood at one end of the room, an ominous coil of rope hanging on the wall beside it. Between the windows was also a large dressing-table, now piled high, to be sure, with serving-trays and silverware but still unmistakably a dressing-table. Down the center of the large room, however, was an unimpeachable long white table, set invitingly for eight or ten persons, a neatly sliced red lobster with appropriate garnishings showing dramatically at each place.

With a nervous and excited, "Make yourselves at home, people: have a drink, Mr. Bellsmith," the host leaped away and went back to a small group of his fellow-players, who were busily engaged in pouring bottles of gin into a punch-bowl. Prominent in this group were the aggressive, stocky shoulders of Charlie Barnes, the comedian, with his short-cropped hair and his snuff-colored suit, a rather uncouth figure in these surroundings. As usual, Charlie Barnes was protesting loudly in his whining voice, advancing emphatic ideas as to how, in his opinion, a punch should be mixed.

In practice, however, the ultimate formula of the punch seemed to be merely an academic question and one never likely to be solved, for, without waiting for

any more perfect state in its progress, Tommy Knight filled three sherbet glasses under the very streams of the pourers and brought them to his new guests.

"It's rather *raccato*," he said apologetically, "but I think it'll get better, don't you?"

Both girls smiled, and all three of his guests lifted their glasses.

"Well, Tommy," proposed Miss Marshall, "'ere's to young marster just a-coomin' of age!"

With the best of intentions she began to drink the toast, but the first sip ended in a choke and a violent cough. Tears came to her eyes. The punch was practically crude gin.

The host looked at her in concern. "What is it? Raw?" he asked. "Here! Let me get you another. It may be better now."

He seized her glass earnestly, but Miss Marshall clung to it. "No, Tommy, please," she begged. "This is all right. It was just that I was trying to talk at the same time."

To prove her case she began again very cautiously to sip the horrible mixture, while Tommy watched her with wistful eyes.

"Please let me get you another," he pleaded. "They're putting some rum in it now, and that will help it a lot." He turned to Bellsmith. "Here, Mr. Bellsmith, throw that away somewhere and let me get you another glass."

But Bellsmith followed the lead of Miss Marshall.

"No, really," he protested. "This is fine. I am enjoying it hugely."

Poor Tommy Knight was easily assured, and he hurried back to the bowl, while the two girls with Bellsmith grinned at each other.

"Tommy's got what you might term a noble start," commented Miss Winner.

Miss Marshall took another furtive sip. "Well, it's his party."

As the girl continued cautiously to empty her glass Bellsmith in turn studied her with an increasing curiosity, for, since entering the room, Miss Marshall had shown a sudden new side to her personality, a personality which could hardly be called dual because one side slipped so easily into the other. It was a puzzling and rather fascinating paradox that now she really surprised him by being just what he would have expected her to be in the first place. This *bonhomie* phase of her curious and impulsive nature was apparently just as natural as had been that cynical, intolerant side which he had seen down-stairs and eminently better suited, Bellsmith decided, for getting her along—if the present company was representative—in her chosen profession.

Answering a hail from the other side of the room, Miss Winner had long since left them when Miss Marshall put her glass on a serving-tray and turned to Bellsmith.

"Well," she said, with a grin, "would you care to meet some of my fellow-mummers?"

It was a question not calling for an answer, and they began their circuit of the room, beginning at the punch-bowl where now only the host and Charlie Barnes remained. The latter Miss Marshall touched on the elbow,

and the dwarfish little man turned belligerently as if expecting to be struck, but, on seeing her errand, straightened and held out his hand to Bellsmith.

"I'm pleased to meet you, sir," he said stiffly.

"Mr. Knight you already know," continued Miss Marshall.

"Oh, yes, certainly, surely; glad to see you, Mr. Bellsmith," agreed the host enthusiastically, shaking hands all over again. "Here, Mr. Bellsmith, try another of these now. It's a lot better. It really is."

In spite of protests, he insisted on filling two more glasses, and Miss Marshall and Bellsmith were forced to take them. As they drank, made cautious by experience, Tommy Knight watched them with all the wistfulness of a bride in her first kitchen.

"Is n't that a lot better?" he begged. "I leave it to you, Miss Marshall. Has n't the rum helped it a lot?"

By some utter accident of alchemy it really had, and both the new-comers made the fatal mistake of saying so, for Tommy Knight needed only this faintest shade of applause to seize their glasses and enthusiastically fill them again. But Miss Marshall interposed.

"Not now, Tommy. Please. We'll come back in a minute. I've got to take Mr. Bellsmith around and introduce him to the help."

Reluctantly the host allowed them to pass on to where Bellony, the big, red-faced tenor, was standing, absolutely alone, looking off into space. On him Miss Marshall wasted no time, making only the briefest and most perfunctory of introductions, to which the tenor replied with only a nod, giving Bellsmith a huge, damp, lifeless

hand—the hand of a laborer turned soft. Beyond, they again encountered Elsie Winner, talking now with Mrs. Trip the “heavy” woman, and the assistant stage-manager, the latter a pleasant and curiously rustic-looking young man with curly hair and spectacles. Beyond this group two chorus girls, specially honored by invitations to this select party of principals, were standing unnoticed in a corner, their arms around each other’s waists. One of them was a faded, pathetic blond child with beautiful eyes and a soiled lace collar. The other was one of the neat and metallic little Jewesses. Both acknowledged the introduction of Bellsmith shyly and each repeated in a vague voice, “I’m pleased to meet you.”

At the end of the room three more men, now including Charlie Barnes, were gathered around another chorus girl, a girl dressed, like Miss Winner, all in gray—gray hat, gray gown, gray spats,—but, unlike her, having a bold, hard face and an impudent *gamine* manner.

In the “Eleanor” company this girl was evidently regarded as whatever may be the feminine equivalent of a “card,” for a group of men was constantly around her and every word she said was invariably greeted with uproarious laughter. Usually one of the men had his arm over her shoulder, not, certainly, from any affection, but merely to draw out the vicious retort which she would inevitably make. As the evening progressed this girl became more and more the center of attraction, and, to the men of the company, seemed more and more convulsing, although Bellsmith could see nothing

amusing about her. Beyond a certain sustained effrontery none of her answers were witty and most of them were merely coarse, but she had only to snap "Yes," or "No," and a roar would go round the table. Perplexed at his own obtuseness and then fascinated by a sort of repulsion, Bellsmith studied her when she was shouting along at her loudest and attracting most attention until he could see plainly enough that, like most of her kind, the poor creature was really slightly insane.

The rather appalling risk of meeting this girl, before a group ready to applaud any impertinence, was an ordeal which was fortunately spared Bellsmith. Before his guide and he reached her, two waiters had appeared in the room, and Tommy Knight began hammering loudly with a dessert-spoon on the table. In his other hand was one of his inevitable sherbet glasses of the birthday punch which, from having been first the color of water and then having changed to brown, had now, by some unexplained process, become a mild pink.

"Ladies and gentlemen," announced the host, waving his glass dangerously, while the curly-haired stage-manager, who stood near him, laughingly dodged each wave; "Ladies and gentlemen, on this auspicious occasion—on this suspicious occasion—well, anyway, sit down and go to it."

In a faint, polite eddy of laughter the guests proceeded to find their places by simply taking the nearest unoccupied chairs, but before they could actually sit down, Charlie Barnes, unwilling to let any ceremony go by so completely without his assistance, rapped at

his end of the table, and the guests halted expectantly, still standing.

Barnes raised his glass, and Bellsmith, having seen him on the stage that evening, waited eagerly for something really good; but Barnes, like most *Yoricks*, was determined to see himself in a serious rôle. As he stood there now with his snuff-colored suit, his aggressive air, and his glass raised stiffly before him, he was curiously the pompous little provincial toast-master of the back-woods region from which he had undoubtedly sprung.

"Ladies and gentlemen," he began, "before we sit down I propose a toast—a toast to the finest fellow that ever sang a song or danced on a stage—Mr. Tommy Knight!"

The other guests, apparently, had not looked for as much as had Bellsmith, but, respecting at least the intent if not the quality of the oration, all lifted their glasses. In the instant of silence the bold-faced girl interjected, "Was that a speech, or what was it?"

As soon as the glasses were emptied Tommy Knight again took the floor.

"Mr. Toast-master and ladies and gentlemen," he replied, "I thank you—"

"For my father I thank you," interrupted the bold-faced girl, "For my sister I thank you. Especially for my little daughter, I thank you. I thank you one and all, and at our next performance in Atlantic City I hope to see each and every one of you. I thank you."

"Be that as it may," resumed Knight, who was still on his feet, "I was about to say—"

"When so rudely interrupted," interposed the bold-faced girl, slapping herself on each cheek.

"I was about to say," continued Knight. "What the devil *was* I about to say?"

"Say it with flowers," suggested somebody, but the host was not to be diverted.

"It is with regret and horror—," he began.

"Great regret and exceeding horror," suggested the curly-haired stage-manager.

"Thank you," said the good-natured Tommy. "I assept the— I assept the— Well, anyway, you know what I do. I assept it."

"Great regret and exceeding horror," prompted the stage-manager, inexorably.

Tommy turned to him as if with a great and sudden light. "That 's just the word I was trying to think of. Say it again, will you?"

"Great regret and exceeding horror," repeated the stage-manager, patiently.

Young Knight began peering into the air before him; then suddenly darted out his hand as if catching an imaginary insect, proceeded to wind it up like a ball of string, and tucked it neatly into the top pocket of his waistcoat.

"There! Now I 've got it," he sighed. "Exceeding regret and horror. It is with exceeding regret and horror that I have to allow you to drink this toast in such a vile mixture but—but—" he ended suddenly and weakly, his voice trailing off almost into a sob, "that manager of this hotel! He has a heart of stone, that manager!"

"For the love of Mike, let 's sit down," proposed the hard-faced girl.

"I beg your pardon, I beg your pardon, I beg your pardon," agreed Tommy; "I *knew* there was something that we came here for, but I 'd forgotten what. Ladies and gentlemen, be seated."

The punch had done its work with the host alone, for the rest of the company sat down quietly and, for a moment or two, began to eat with that prim, embarrassed genteelness which has probably opened every banquet since the beginning of time.

Bellsmith found himself between Miss Marshall and the "heavy woman," Mrs. Trip, an immense, dowager-type of Englishwoman with frankly gray hair, an accentuated London stage accent, and a sullen, disappointed face. At worst, however, she looked eminently safe, and Bellsmith addressed himself manfully to the task of polite dinner talk, but, beyond a few curt and unrelated responses, all in a deep Henry Irving tone of voice, the heavy woman would have none of him.

Poor Celestine Trip! for, by the malignant fate which pursues all fat women, that was really her name. She was representative of a type of English actress which, in minor rôles and all unknown to the public, infests the American stage. The daughter of a small magistrate or something of that sort in the south of England, educated in a superficial sense and, in her youth, skirting socially on the edges of the minor gentry, she had, almost in middle life, eloped with a perfectly honest and hard-working actor who would have cared for her decently

and worshiped her honorably had she not patronized and hectoring him into his grave.

For twenty years now, on this side of the water, she had existed solely for the purpose of putting Americans in their places. Indeed, as the increasing flood of fellow English actors threatened to disturb the monopoly of her accent and her airs, she had transferred the process even to her fellow-countrymen, had begun to take the despised Americans into her confidence and point out, as one who knew, that this English actress or that was "really a little Cockney, common as the stones, any one from the other side could easily spot them."

Her formula of life was a simple one and, for her stupid, English-provincial soul, it was perfectly convincing. All men and women whose birth was obviously below her own she dismissed as "common." All those whose circumstances were unmistakably above hers she stigmatized as "dowdy" or "nouveau." One half of the formula served for Charlie Barnes, as one is forced to fear the other half would, if occasion arose, have served for the Archbishop of Canterbury. For it is needless to say that women like Celestine Trip never meet any one of their own exact social status, and it is equally needless to say that not all such women are English.

In this particular case the harmless snobbery of the fatuous old woman was made poignant and hideous by the fact that every night this patronizer of "solicitaws," "linen drapaws," and other members of "your American upper classes" was obliged to earn her living by the coarse comedy of her own huge

appearance, although, with the bland self-esteem of her kind, it is probable that she was completely able to blind herself to the truth and attribute the laughs which made her success to her own "technic" and comic genius. In all mercy let us hope so.

CHAPTER IX

LUCKILY Bellsmith was not compelled long to keep up his efforts to entertain "the Duchess," as Mrs. Trip was called in the "Eleanor" company, for the genteel politeness which had opened the feast was of short duration. In fact, without being exactly conscious of how the transition had come about, others besides Bellsmith were soon aware that Tommy Knight's birthday party was rolling along very nicely indeed.

The natural-selection method of seating was one which should be looked into, for the inevitable and highly successful result of it in this case was to bring together the several groups of congenial souls. At the sides of the table Miss Marshall and Bellsmith, Mrs. Trip, Bellony and Miss Winner formed what was, both literally and figuratively, the conservative center. At the head, Tommy Knight and his coadjutor, the curly-haired assistant stage-manager, formed a moderate-liberal right, beaming good will and reconciliation toward all the various factions. At the other end, Charlie Barnes, the bold-faced girl, the two lost chorus sheep, and one or two men who were, neither then nor afterward, ever identified, formed what might be called the extreme left, with all the attributes of that term.

Bellsmith himself, who had been appalled at the idea of eating another supper, found himself doing amaz-

ingly well with his lobster. The punch apparently had fixed on pink as its final color, and several rounds of this hue had been circulated when a buzzing and giggling from the extreme left culminated in the rising of Charlie Barnes, still—but now only in burlesque—in his attitude of the backwoods toast-master.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” he began, rubbing his hands, “with your kind permission I wish to introduce Miss Poppy Vaughn, nee Hedberg, who will now favor us with one of her famous classical and interpretive dances performed on the leading stages of the world and before all the crowned heads of Europe.”

In the mild and tentative applause which greeted his announcement the comedian sat down, cupped his hands before his face, and began to play a lively air on a jews'-harp. At the same moment a man beside him stretched out his hands and began to accompany him on an imaginary banjo. The *whish* and *pang* of the two together were astoundingly realistic. It was, in fact, two or three minutes before Bellsmith realized that the jews'-harp was as purely imaginary as the banjo.

The bold-faced girl, who was apparently none other than Miss Poppy Vaughn, “nee Hedberg,” was, however, suddenly diffident. It was curious to see her as blushing and reluctant as an amateur. First self consciously and then angrily she brushed aside all applause, and the music stopped in the middle of a bar.

“Hey! What’s the matter?” demanded Barnes.

“Come on, Poppy! Oh, go ahead!” called several voices from the length of the table.

At last the girl rose and stood waiting in the small open space of carpet between Barnes and the folding bed. Barnes nodded his head and the imaginary instruments struck up again.

At the first note the girl's face changed suddenly, assuming a set, waxen smile. At the same moment she rose to the very tips of her street shoes, clasped her hands behind her head, and went flickering around the room. Like many children of immigrant parents, the girl had apparently been trained for a ballet dancer of the old school, and Bellsmith had to admit that her performance was remarkably good. At least in those informal surroundings it seemed remarkably good, and, watching her during the next three minutes, Bellsmith was assailed with a question that was to perplex him a great many times during the months of his acquaintance with the "Eleanor" company.

How was it, he asked himself, as he watched the girl and as he listened to the improvisations of Barnes and his companion, how was it that people of what were unmistakably such limited minds and talents, so completely without ambition or initiative, could suddenly rise to such apparent heights of real excellence, real cleverness, then with equal suddenness and equal resignation, completely relapse to the level of less than mediocrity from which they had sprung? Any girl of his own acquaintance who could dance one tenth as well as this girl would have been regarded as a prodigy. Indeed Bellsmith had seen heralded "artists" of what Barnes had called the "interpretive" school who had nothing like the genuine accuracy and finish of this

girl—none of her genuine groundwork. Yet they were highly paid and famous. This girl was a nonentity in a routine hack company and always would be. What was the difference? Didn't this girl want to be anything different and could she be if she wanted? There must be some answer, but Bellsmith was to become far more familiar with the kind of talent represented by Charlie Barnes and the bold-faced girl before he discovered it.

For three or four minutes the girl continued to dance to her imaginary jews'-harp and banjo; then, suddenly catching just the right note, she turned a complete handspring without ruffling a line of her petticoat. Oddly, it was the most refined thing that she had done all the evening. A *boom* from an imaginary bass drum, thrown in for good measure by some other extemporaneous artist farther up the table, caught her as she landed, and the music abruptly stopped. The girl, breathless and laughing, plopped into her chair, and, although showered with applause in which Bellsmith was the leader, she refused to repeat. A moment later she was again merely the coarse, witless *gamine*.

Waiters bearing cigars and Tommy Knight pathetically scouring the bottom of the punch-bowl furnished a respite for a moment; then Barnes, who had now completely edged himself into the mastership of ceremonies, began calling up the table to Bellony.

"Hey, Tony! Your turn next! Give us a number."

A girl, hopefully and gently clapping, added to the invitation, which was completed by a sudden and respect-

ful silence that settled over the entire table. This was evidently to be an event.

There was one virtue at least about Adrian Bellony, "nee" (as Barnes would have said) Francis Xavier Bellamy. He was neither reluctant nor precipitate in responding to an invitation to perform. Merely waiting, professionally, until the room was in complete silence, he ran his finger between his collar and his neck, fastened his eyes on the molding, opened his tremendous throat and began to sing:

"Che gelida manina—"

Except that it had range and power, Bellony's was probably the worst voice that Bellsmith had ever heard in his life, at least in that song. The piercing, metallic tenor cut like a buzz-saw, and Bellsmith, sitting almost opposite that open throat, got the full force of it. He was almost afraid that he had winced when the shock of it had first hit him, but sincerely hoped that he had n't, for the other guests were apparently deeply impressed. For once the air of mockery had completely left the room. Every one remained motionless, the eyes of the men on the singer, fixed and respectful, the eyes of the women turned musingly downward. Even Tilly Marshall, beside Bellsmith, was lost in a reverie. Even the bold-faced girl was silent.

The singer went on, throaty and nasal at the same time, falsely accenting the Italian words to get cheap, sentimental effects, bellowing at absolutely unrelated

moments and pianissimo-ing when piano would have been more than ample. Where the voice was expected to break in pathos he merely slurred up a half-tone and back again. Where the song was intended to trail off wistfully, Bellony "improved" it by jumping up a full octave and ending in a piercing, triumphant falsetto, sustained and strongly crescendo. Words, fortunately, cannot state what he did to that song:

" . . . deeeeee!!!!!"

dee—

"Wha-wha-ha-de—

Alas, poor *Mimi*, indeed, if she had to stand while a man held her hand in the darkness and sang like that!

As the singer went on and on and the horror grew, Bellsmith glanced furtively and incredulously around the table. Were they really taking this seriously? Wasn't it a huge joke? He saw that there was no mistake. His fellow-guests were not merely polite. They were genuinely moved, their eyes on the tablecloth, their attitudes strained and self-conscious.

And again there rose within Bellsmith one of those wandering, reflective queries which make up the life of the lonely man. Perhaps this second question was an answer to his first. Again, he wondered, how could this group of worldly, experienced people, who jeered at convention, who would be the first to mock at imposture, who could produce and appreciate such a finished, professional thing as the dance he had just witnessed, suddenly fall to depths in which they could be genuinely stirred by, see nothing ludicrous in, this awful singing? By one of those paradoxes that they should have been

the first to appreciate, the handspring of the hard-faced girl had been so completely artistic and the rendering of Puccini was so completely vulgar. Yet the "Eleanor" company obviously regarded this as much the higher performance of the two.

Omne ignotum pro magnifico! That must be the only explanation of it although Bellsmith made a mental note to look up the quotation in the morning. He was a little hazy whether it was *omne* or *omna* and, by some inverse logic, the singing of Bellony made him viciously determined to correct his own Latin.

Still on and on went the piercing, grating tenor, now softening into that beloved, sentimental falsetto. Again Bellsmith, thoroughly unhappy, trying hard to look as if he enjoyed it but knowing that he was making a very bad job of it, looked furtively up the table and suddenly encountered a twinkle in the eye of the curly-haired stage-manager. For an instant a laugh telegraphed itself from one man to the other; then both caught themselves, the face of the stage-manager relaxing into bored woodenness, the face of Bellsmith contorting back into polite appreciation of the singer opposite him. But that twinkle had been unmistakable. Sudden flashings like that across a table make lifelong allies. This one was to do so in this case.

At last the interminable song came to an end in first a dead silence, then a wild burst of applause. Shufflings and conversations sprang up around the table, but the massacred Puccini had done its work. The party was visibly sentimentalized, and Tommy Knight sprang up in alarm. Stringing three or four of the sherbet

glasses on the fingers of each hand, he made the round of the table.

"Come on, people," he ordered. "The dregs. The bitter dregs."

At the same time the imaginary jews'-harp and the imaginary banjo began operations at the other end of the table, but from that feat the flavor was gone. Charlie Barnes saw very plainly that he was now running second string to the red-faced tenor. He began a conspiratory whispering with his partner of the imaginary banjo and, as the pink punch again began to restore the *élan* of the party, the banjo player rose and knocked for silence.

"Ladies and gentlemen," he announced. "We have the honor to have with us this evening Mr. De Wolf Hopper, who will now favor us with a recitation of—of—"

The speaker leaned down to catch a prompting whisper from the orator himself and then continued:

"—of 'The Bells.' "

No one laughed, for no one was quite sure what it was all about. Very solemnly, Barnes rose in his place. Impressively he took a sip of water, brushed his hand over his close-cropped hair, cleared his throat, and began in a voice that might have been that of De Wolf Hopper or of William Jennings Bryan, for all that Bellsmith knew.

" 'T was a balmy summer evening
And a goodly crowd was there—' "

At these words, however, a roar and catcalls arose from the table. As if shocked, Barnes held up his hand.

"Gentlemen, gentlemen," he admonished. "This piece is serious, tragic."

He began again.

"'T was a balmy summer evening—"

But this time he got only as far as "evening," for the catcalls began again, and one of the men who was to be forever unidentified began to clutch at his throat and gulp like a stage maniac, crying, hoarsely, "A drink! A drink!"

Barnes grinned. Things were going as he liked them now and, knowing that he had the house with him, he let the ribaldry run its own course. As it died out he began again:

"'T was a balmy summer evening
And a goodly crowd was there—"

This time Tommy Knight, at the head of the table, suddenly threw his arms wildly over the cloth, upsetting two coffee-cups, buried his face in his lavender shirt-sleeves, and began to sob convulsively.

"Don't! Don't!" he choked. "I can't stand it! I can't stand it!"

Alone among them the curly-haired stage-manager sat staring at the reciter with solemn, pedantic interest.

“ ‘ ‘Twas a balmy summer evening,’ ” he prompted gently, “ ‘and a goodly crowd was there.’ ”

Vaguely amused but puzzled, Bellsmith turned to Miss Marshall.

“What is it?” he asked. “What ’s he trying to say?”

“Search me,” said Miss Marshall.

She turned to the curly-haired man who sat just beyond her.

“Pete, Mr. Bellsmith wants to know what it is.”

With a friendly grin the stage-manager leaned over to Bellsmith.

“Do you mean to say that you have never heard that classic selection? I ’m surprised.”

“Well, that ’s all very well in its way,” replied Miss Marshall, “but what is it?”

“ ‘The Face on The Bar-room Floor.’ ”

“Oh!” said Miss Marshall, completely enlightened, but Bellsmith was still in the dark.

The three of them leaned back, Tommy Knight raised a grinning face from his shirt-sleeves, and Barnes tried again.

“ ‘ ‘Twas a balmy summer evening
And a goodly crowd was there—’ ”

That, however, was as much as Bellsmith was ever to hear of the famous ballad, for this time there came a sudden interruption from an outside source—a loud and imperious knock on the door. Instantly both the speaker and the audience fell silent, the former still belligerent, the latter rather ashamed.

"Come in," called some one, cautiously.

The door opened, and a grinning bell-boy stood inside.

"The night clerk says please not so much noise."

"All right," answered Barnes, still standing and ready to go on. "I can say it just as well in a whisper." He waved at the boy. "'Out, damnèd spot!' That's Shakspeare and means, 'The hook'—'Vanish'—'Leave.'"

The boy turned to go, but somehow, for the first time, the host, Tommy Knight, seemed to grasp the fact that something was going on. He rose and walked with unctuous politeness toward the boy.

"This is *my* party," he announced. "Who did you want?"

The boy grinned. "The night clerk says please not so much noise."

This apparently struck Knight as a wholly new idea. He hung his head and pondered it.

"The *night* clerk says it," he repeated thoughtfully, as if that made all the difference in the world. "The *night* clerk says it." Then suddenly a beaming air of renunciation came over him and he added. "Well, if he does, he does."

"Come on, Tommy, sit down," called the stage-manager. "The boy's right. The other people in the hotel want to sleep."

As usually happens in such cases, if no one had interfered the host would have been quite content to have it end there, but, as it was, this new voice served only to give him new life. He waved a weak hand toward

the curly-haired man. "Now, you keep out of this. This is *my* party. Is n't it, boy?"

"Yes, sir. I guess so," grinned the boy.

He turned to make his escape, but Knight grabbed him by the dingy gold braid on his shoulder and drew him back into the room.

"Now let's argue this out," he said, pleadingly, "man to man. I mean man to bell-boy."

The boy stood grinning impassively. He was evidently used to such scenes, but Barnes became suddenly impatient to go on with his recitation.

"All right, boy," he called. "We'll keep quiet."

Again the boy tried to dodge out, but again Knight caught him by the shoulder.

"Just a minute! Just a minute!"

As the boy watched him curiously, Knight began to pull crumpled dollar bills, one after another, out of every pocket of his waistcoat.

"Say, boy," he began. "Can't you get us—get us something—just a little more?"

The boy shook his head. "I'm sorry, sir. I can't get a thing. Not unless you know the manager personally, and he's gone to bed. I don't think he'd get up for any one."

Curiously, the mention of liquor had made Knight perfectly sober. It also had an amazingly fraternal effect on every one in the room, including the bell-boy. Drawn into a common cause, they all looked around at each other inquiringly.

"Is n't there any one here who knows the ropes?"

asked Knight. "Does n't somebody know the manager?"

Suddenly, by a process of elimination, Bellsmith, who had not been paying much attention, discovered that every one at the table was looking at him, the only stranger and the only native. Whether he welcomed it or not, Bellsmith's great moment had come. He wet his lips and spoke to the boy, nervously.

"What's that head waiter's name?" he asked. "Is he still around?"

"Fernoy?" said the boy. "Yes, he's still here, but I don't think he'll give you anything."

"Well, try him anyway," broke in the host, but the boy evidently had more faith in the dinner-jacketed Bellsmith.

"Who'll I tell him?" he asked.

"Tell him Mr.— Mr.—" interposed Knight, regally, and Bellsmith supplied the name for him:

"Mr. Bellsmith."

A few minutes later there was a smoother but not less authoritative knock at the door, and Barnes piped up:

"There's your party!"

Bellsmith, not eager for any more scenes like the last, quickly stepped to the door and opened it. The head waiter, in day dress, still the diplomat but now the diplomat on a confidential mission, stepped into the room.

"Did you want something, Mr. Bellsmith?"

"Yes, Jules," said Bellsmith. "Do you think that it would be possible to get us a little—" He searched

for a word but found nothing better than the one used by the host. "A little—something!"

The head waiter looked a bit uncertainly around the bedraggled room, but, after all, Bellsmith was Bellsmith.

"What would you like, Mr. Bellsmith?"

"Why, er," began Bellsmith, "could you find half a dozen bottles of champagne?"

A gasp went up from the hard-faced girl, and the curly-haired stage-manager looked at Bellsmith with a sudden amused admiration, but the head waiter seemed to find nothing extraordinary in the request.

"Why, yes, sir, I think so. Of course we have n't got what we used to have, but the manager himself saved out a little imported—very good, sir, really very good."

"That will do nicely. Thank you very much," replied Bellsmith. As the head waiter hesitated, he added. "Er—perhaps you don't want this signed for. Shall I—?"

The head waiter held up his hand. "Oh, that's all right, Mr. Bellsmith! That's perfectly all right."

As soon as the door had closed behind him, the hard-faced girl stared at Bellsmith.

"Say, Duke, you must be the *Mayor* of this city!"

But no one joined her in her laugh. The moment was too deep for that.

CHAPTER X

IN the life of a furnace fire (and so, presumably, in all human enterprise, my dear children) there comes a point after which it is of absolutely no use to pile on fuel or to apply forced drafts. The thing is due to be ashes—out, gray, extinct. Effort beyond that point is effort wasted. Thus it is, sooner or later, with every gay party, and thus it was with the birthday feast of Tommy Knight, aged thirty-one.

The arrival of Bellsmith's champagne was, to be sure, greeted with a homage befitting its rank. Toasts to to every one, Jules and Bellsmith included, were ceremoniously drunk, but when Tommy Knight had tried to argue, man to bell-boy, the evening had reached its peak. Actors are, as a rule, the most law-abiding people in the world, or else they have a keen fear of public opinion; and no second reminder from the night clerk would be needed that evening.

Once, indeed, the virtuoso on the imaginary banjo tried to repeat his success by an improvisation on an imaginary Hawaiian zither, for, although not an original soul, the man was persistent, but no one paid much attention. In fact, at the first few bars, Charlie Barnes stopped the performance, quite as eager to take the lead in civic good order as he had been to take the lead in riotous living. He tossed his head

imperiously and summoned the imaginary zitherist to a consultation in a corner, where Barnes talked in low tones with frequent glances in the direction of Bellsmith. He was obviously laying down the proposition that Bellsmith, in supplying champagne, had also assumed responsibility for its consumption—a hospitality which no good imaginary zitherist should violate. A very excellent rule for life, concluded Bellsmith.

In the interval also between the disappearance of the bell-boy and the arrival of the champagne, the company had taken the opportunity to rise from the table and was now dispersed around the room in little groups. From one of these, which of course centered around the bold-faced girl, arose occasional sporadic bursts of merriment, but the others had fallen inevitably into that shop talk from which the actor is never long absent.

Bellsmith, for his part, found himself at a window exchanging platitudes on the American theater and on New England life with the curly-haired assistant stage-manager, who, being called "Pete," was of course really named Erasmus Surdam. Surdam, it appeared, was a native of Maine and had spent half a term at "Boston Tech," for it seems to be another of those incomprehensible rules of the theater that all future actors begin by studying engineering—or dentistry—or law.

To Bellsmith, however, this quiet fag-end of the party was more enjoyable than the first part had been. He was, by nature if not by opportunity, one of those men who ask little of life but, equally, have a vague terror of going to bed and, say what one will, the best company

in the world is a group of people who are not in themselves tremendously clever—so long as they have no particular scruples. It is dullness linked with conviction that has given stupid people their bad name.

Below the two men standing there at the window, the Main Street of Leicester, deserted at that end of town and at that hour of the night, offered an appearance not unsentimental, one inciting to reverie. Neither man had said a word for some time when Bellsmith vaguely became aware of Miss Marshall's voice over his shoulder.

"I've spoken twice," the girl was now saying, "and I am about to speak a third time. After that there won't be any more."

Bellsmith turned in furious apology and found the girl holding out her hand.

"Good night, Mr. Bellsmith," she said. "I think that I'd better struggle up to bed."

Bellsmith walked with her to the open door, suddenly aware, as he crossed the room, that the party had thinned amazingly. The bold-faced girl was now the only woman left. In the last hours of any party there are always unaccountable gaps like that.

Neither one knowing exactly what to say, Bellsmith and Miss Marshall walked slowly along the padded hall to the stairs which flanked the elevator shaft, where they stopped indefinitely.

"I wonder," said Bellsmith, with a studied diffidence, "whether I ought to go back and see the evening through."

It was dangerous, as Bellsmith had already found, to

try attitudes with Miss Marshall, for the girl pierced his pose with a mischievous smile.

"Does that mean," she asked, "that you 're rather crazy to go back? If so, why not?"

Bellsmith laughed. "To tell the truth, I *don't* want to go home. I 'm having the time of my life, especially now, just sitting around in the small hours, smoking and talking. That 's really my idea of a good time, but every one in Leicester takes a pride in getting up at twelve and saying, 'Well, me for the hay!'

"But I mean," he added, after a pause, "I don't want to butt in. You see, I 'm only an outsider."

The girl laughed. "Don't worry. Charlie Barnes and Pete Surdam will sit up all night, and nobody who has the entrée to the champagne cellar will be an outsider. Do you think you can get home all right?"

Bellsmith clamped his hand to his trousers pocket. "By Jove! I 'm glad you spoke of that. I have n't a key. I'll have to telephone them if I'm going to stay."

"Who 's 'them'?"

"The household," answered Bellsmith, entirely innocent of the fact that he had not at all answered her question. The girl looked at him quietly. "Tell me," she said. "By any long chance you 're not married, are you?"

"Good heavens, no!" answered Bellsmith.

"I was sure you weren't," said the girl, "but those things have such a funny way of popping out at you these days."

Bellsmith was aghast. "My dear lady," he began,

"if I were married you would n't—down-stairs there—you would n't have supposed that I—"

"Oh, you might," she said nonchalantly. She switched the subject mechanically. "Do you usually forget your key?"

"No," said Bellsmith. "The truth is, I—I seldom go out. That's why I want to make this party last."

Abruptly the girl gave him her hand. Bellsmith took it and, as they looked into each other's eyes, for a moment again came that humorous, lingering flash of understanding.

"It will not be necessary," said Bellsmith dryly, "for you to say that you are glad I did n't kiss you, for, much as I want to, I am not going to do it."

"Thank you," said the girl, "not for not kissing me, but for not obliging me to say that." She paused a moment and then added, "It's going to be an awful strain talking to each other, is n't it? Will we always have to be using double and triple meanings?"

Bellsmith laughed. "I'm ready to stop whenever you are. My old head is n't up to much. I confess that it's beginning to lag."

The girl withdrew her hand. "Oh, well!" she sighed, "I suppose that we've got a hard week of flirtation ahead of us, so I must get some rest."

She turned and ran up the stairs, while Bellsmith, smiling, walked much more slowly down the single flight to the office. Even the night clerk, drowsing in an arm-chair behind the desk, had apparently been informed that the house held a guest of distinction, for he shook himself together and rose to his feet.

"Anything I can do for you, Mr. Bellsmith?"

"Only the telephone."

"Come right around here, behind the desk. Then you won't have to put in a nickel."

After an interminable wait Bellsmith succeeded in rousing a sleepy William at the other end of the wire, explained where he was and when he would probably be home. The night clerk listened with interest. Even night clerks like to have people around.

"Fine weather we 're having, Mr. Bellsmith."

"Fine."

Along the desk was ranged a glass cigar-case, and some strange instinct, inherited, perhaps, from tavern and stage-coach days, was stirred within Bellsmith. He looked over the show of gold bands critically.

"What do you smoke?" he asked, in a voice that was almost official.

"Oh, anything," said the clerk. "'Pride of Boston Harbor'?" he suggested with the nice etiquette of his profession, naming a cigar which was not too expensive and yet expensive enough to imply tidy wealth and a neat discrimination on the part of the benefactor.

Bellsmith hesitated.

"Or 'Manuel Garcias'?" suggested the clerk, raising his bid a point.

This name sounded better, and with a grand air the clerk spread a handful of "Manuel Garcias" on the counter. At Bellsmith's gesture (a shoe drummer could n't have done it better) the night clerk selected one and Bellsmith pocketed the rest. This was really a bully evening. Bellsmith had been quite right up-

stairs when he had said that he had never had more fun in his life. He decided to see what else could happen to one who probed life at various points.

"By the way," he suggested hopefully, "you don't suppose that you could find a couple of bottles of old stone ale, that have been forgotten in the cellar?"

The clerk laughed. "They may be there, but they're not forgotten. I don't know. I might." He reached behind him for a key. "Shall I have it sent up to 26?"

"I can take it up myself," replied Bellsmith.

A moment later he was plodding happily up the stairway to Room 26. He was glad that the clerk had mentioned the number, for he had forgotten which one it was.

As he entered, three of the men, now seated in conclave around the end of the table, looked up, surprised; then Charlie Barnes went on from where he had evidently left off.

"Well, sir," he was saying, "that was in Little Rock, Arkansas. The train was due there at seven forty-two, and not a stick of our scenery or a trunk of our stuff was in the house—"

Bellsmith hesitated by the door. He did feel, after all, that he was an intruder but the curly-haired stage manager, seeing his hesitation, moved out a chair.

"Come on in, Mr. Bellsmith," he urged. "Come on in."

The party had thinned still more since Bellsmith's departure. Only Charlie Barnes, the stage-manager, the banjo-player, and Bellony now sat around the table, the last named still absolutely stolid, gazing blankly at

the wall, and smoking his five-hundredth cigar. In a chair by the folding wardrobe poor Tommy Knight was slunk, at times blinking, at times asleep, his hands hanging down at his sides. In the center of the long table the empty champagne bottles were grouped like ninepins. The room was three-ply with smoke.

Bellsmith walked to the table and opened the newspaper parcel that he carried under his arm. The others watched him indifferently, but as three squat stone bottles were disclosed a mild shout went up.

"I thought this might be—cooling," said Bellsmith.

"Scotch ale, as I 'm alive!" exclaimed the stage-manager.

"Mister," said Barnes, "I believe you 're the only one of your kind in the world."

Bellony said nothing—just puffed. If Bellsmith had brought in a tame kangaroo it would have been just the same.

Barnes produced a knife and a corkscrew from his watch-chain and, seizing a tumbler, flicked what remained of its contents in the general direction of the window. As the glasses were filled Tommy Knight roused himself.

"What 's that you fellows are drinking?" he demanded.

"Scotch ale," said Surdam.

"Oh, go on," grunted Knight, closing his eyes.

"Say, look here," suggested Barnes. "Give him some of that. It will do him good."

"I believe it will," said Surdam.

He filled a glass, walked over, and, supporting him

with his arm, held it to the sleeper's lips. Poor Tommy, blinking, sipped it feebly, like a fever patient sipping a cooling niter. He opened his eyes.

"By George, that 's good!"

"Now, look here, Tommy," said Surdam. "Remember you 've got to play a matinée to-morrow. Why don't you go to bed?"

The host waved the suggestion away. "Nothing doing! It 's my party, and I 'm going to see it out."

"Come on, Tommy, don't be a fool," added Barnes. "We 're all going in a minute. We 're just waiting—" He looked around for suggestions, and his eye landed on Bellsmith. "We 're just waiting for this gentleman to go to his train. He 's getting a train for Boston in fifteen minutes."

Knight opened his eyes and stared at Bellsmith with the terrible clairvoyance of the inebriated.

"Try something else," he suggested. "He looks like a man who takes trains, does n't he?"

The banjo-player jumped up and grabbed the remaining stone bottle. "I tell you what we 'll do, Tommy. You come on up and we 'll split this bottle between us in your room."

He lifted the host to his feet, but the latter shook him off.

"I 'm all right," he said, and, curiously enough, he really was. He shook himself briskly. "Well, if you don't mind, folks; if you 'll excuse me, Mr. Bellsmith—"

The party was now reduced to Barnes, Bellony, the stage-manager, and Bellsmith. Bellsmith spread his cigars on the table with a gesture not unlike that of

the night clerk, and Barnes went on with his tale.

"We had an act, mind you, calling for two changes of costume for everybody in the cast. There was six of us, including one kid that came on just at the start and just at the end—"

And so, on and on, the reminiscences of Charlie Barnes traveled up and down the Mississippi Valley, a tale of twenty years past, involving nothing, really, but curiously fascinating to Bellsmith. No one but Barnes spoke a word until suddenly the little box telephone on the wall jangled out, loudly. The stage-manager listlessly got up and answered it.

"Hello!"

He turned and added, "Long-distance."

All the men waited in silence, as people do wait when a private call is in progress; then suddenly the stage-manager began again.

"Hello! Hello!"

A rigmarole answered him from the other end of the wire.

"What 's that?" he asked. "Who?"

With a grin he put his hand over the transmitter and turned to the room.

"It 's that damn fool, Tommy Knight," he announced. "He said that he was Charles Dillingham, and he wanted to offer Barnes a part at the Hippodrome at a thousand a week. But, by Jove, he did it pretty well at that! He fooled *me*. I really thought it *was* long-distance."

"Tell him to go to bed," commanded Barnes.

The stage-manager turned to the instrument. "That

you, Mr. Dillingham? Mr. Barnes says he won't come for less than a million a week."

"And a maid," added Barnes.

"And a maid," repeated the stage-manager. He hung up the receiver, and Barnes went on.

"Well, when we got to New Orleans, the girl who was playing the part of my mother—"

A moment later the telephone rang again.

"Don't answer it," commanded Barnes angrily.

"He 'll keep ringing until I do," said Surdam and he answered again.

"Hello, Mr. Dillingham!" he said, then listened, laughing, while an obviously feminine voice came over the wire.

Surdam blocked the transmitter and turned to the room. "That 's Poppy Vaughn talking now. He must have called her up and told her to ring in. She 's pretending she 's some girl who 's got a crush on Tony."

"Tell her to shut up and go to sleep," replied Bellony, breaking silence for the first time that evening, except when he had sung. "They 'll have the whole house waked up in a minute."

The stage-manager soothed the insistent Miss Vaughn in some manner, and Barnes went on with his tale. A moment later, however, the bell rang again. Surdam rose, laughing.

"I wonder who he is this time."

He listened a moment, made two or three jocular retorts, and then turned wearily to Bellsmith. "Now he wants you, Mr. Bellsmith. He 's pretending that he 's a reporter and he says your house is on fire—"

"And your children will burn," suggested Barnes.

Bellsmith merely grinned, and Surdam turned back to the instrument. "Mr. Bellsmith can't come to the phone. He says he is n't interested."

More words came over the wire and Surdam appealed to Bellsmith.

"I 'm afraid you 'll have to shut him up. He 'll keep jiggling the receiver all night if you don't."

Bellsmith good-naturedly rose and went to the telephone.

"Hello!"

Tommy Knight had apparently now enlisted the services of the banjo-player.

"Mr. Bellsmith? Did you know that your house is on fire?"

"Yes, I knew it," answered Bellsmith, laughing. "Is n't it jolly?"

He heard his answer reported to some one else at the other end of the wire and a laugh. Controlling itself with difficulty, the voice insisted, "No, really, Mr. Bellsmith, your house is burning up."

Imitating Surdam, Bellsmith cupped his hand over the transmitter and reported progress to the room.

"He still insists that my house is in flames. Can't we put up some joke on *him*? Can't one of you imitate the manager of the hotel or something?"

"Oh, no!" replied Barnes, now thoroughly disgusted. "Just tell him, 'To hell with it! Let it burn.'"

Bellsmith turned back to the telephone. "All right. Happy dreams," he said, but the voice, now audibly laughing, insisted.

"But, Mr. Bellsmith, do you *want* your house to burn?"

Bellsmith laughed. "Yes, I don't care. To hell with it! Let it burn."

He returned to the table, but Knight had apparently succeeded in his purpose of breaking up the party, for Bellony was standing up and stretching wearily. Surdam, as much of a night-hawk as Bellsmith, strolled to the window and threw it up to let in the air.

"What 's that?" he said, suddenly.

From the street below came unmistakably the shriek of a siren. Two others joined Surdam at the window and put their heads out just in time to see a fire-engine tearing past the window, its muffler wide open, dropping sparks as it roared over the asphalt.

The three men drew inside the room and stared at Bellsmith, who felt himself growing pale.

"Good gosh!" exclaimed Barnes. "you don't suppose that your house really is on fire?"

CHAPTER XI

"TO HELL WITH IT! LET IT BURN!"
So Says Young Millionaire When
Told That House Is In Flames
LEICESTER HAS ITS OWN NERO
Owner of Historic Mansion Laughs and
Jokes at Gay Feast as Fire Engines Toot.

"To hell with it, let it burn!" were the words of Arnold Bellsmith, sole heir and now sole possessor of one of Leicester's historic fortunes, when informed by The Courier early this morning that his residence, the famous old Bellsmith mansion on Main Street, was in flames.

As if to carry out more completely his rôle of a modern Nero, Mr. Bellsmith, after expressing complete indifference as to the fate of his ancestral home, went back to his revels at a gay feast given to members of a theatrical troupe now playing at a local theater.

A reporter for The Courier was on his way home between 2 and 3 o'clock this morning when smoke was discovered issuing from a cellar window of the old Bellsmith mansion by the night watchman of the Equity building next door and was thus one of the first on the scene.

While the watchman turned in the alarm from the

private box at the Equity building, the Courier man and Officer J. A. Schmeltz aroused the inmates, the English butler, the cook and two maids. The chauffeur, Michael Keefe, does not live on the premises.

From the servants, two of whom were hysterical and all of whom were highly alarmed, it was learned that Mr. Bellsmith was at an "entertainment" at a local hotel and, on the news being telephoned to The Courier office, an effort was made to locate him.

Although it was now nearly 3 A. M. the "entertainment" was apparently still in full swing for, when The Courier office was connected with what was said to be Mr. Bellsmith's room, a jocular voice answered and, without waiting to see who was calling, told the reporter to "go hold your head under a faucet but don't forget to anchor your brains."

When informed of the fire and told who was speaking, this merry blade was not in the least impressed but, after several similar quips, finally consented to call Mr. Bellsmith to the phone.

The latter seemed to take the conflagration quite as gaily as had his friends. He said that he had already been informed of the fire and added, "Isn't it jolly?"

When asked whether he liked the idea of his old historic mansion burning down, Mr. Bellsmith replied, "Yes. To hell with it! Let it burn!" Further attempts to get any statement from Mr. Bellsmith were wholly unavailing although it could be heard over the phone that his replies were received with uproarious applause by his fellow-diners.

Fortunately the Leicester fire department took

the blaze more seriously than did the owner and by efficient work confined the flames to the cellar and the laundry. Due to a rumor that the Equity building was on fire a large crowd speedily gathered, and The Courier office was kept answering inquiries until the last edition went to press at 4:30 A. M.

Conservative estimate places the value of the Bellsmith residence, including the land, at \$750,000. This represents only a small portion of the Bellsmith holdings in Leicester. Mr. Bellsmith, it is understood, takes no part in his own business affairs, being entirely a man of pleasure. The estate is in the hands of the Pilgrim Trust Company but officers of the latter, when roused by telephone, would make no statement.

From other sources it was learned that the "entertainment" was one given to a group of theatrical people including largely the members of a musical comedy company now playing at a local theater.

Mr. Bellsmith is understood to have a wide acquaintance in "the profession" and was seen dining earlier in the evening with two young ladies from the company.

In the opinion of Fire Chief I. L. Moriarty, the blaze was caused by the leakage of soot from a defective furnace pipe. The servants said that the condition of this pipe had been called to Mr. Bellsmith's attention several times but that he had seemed utterly indifferent to it.

This gaudy story and about half a column more of it, including a detailed chronicle of the Bellsmith family hurriedly lifted, almost verbatim, from "The Memorial

History of Leicester County," Bellsmith was reading, propped up in bed, on the morning after Tommy Knight's birthday party. The bed was his own, and his bedroom showed so signs of disorder for, as "The Courier" had pointed out with an unerring sense of dramatic values, the only remarkable feature about the fire had been the Epicurean hilarity with which the news had been received by the principal sufferer. In the halls outside there still lingered faintly the unpleasant smell of charred wood doused with water while, even from where Bellsmith was sitting in bed, the walks at the edge of the lawn could be seen to be heavily blackened by soft coal cinders from the engines and the grass borders thoroughly trampled by the crowd.

Otherwise, inside and outside the house, the sights and sounds were exactly those which had been the familiar accompaniment of Bellsmith's awakenings for fifteen years. The November sun flickered wanly and fitfully over the few scant elm-trees inside the iron fence while, through the closed windows, came the usual sounds of a principal street in a bustling city. The steel shoes of truck-horses clattered monotonously and incessantly on the asphalt. Motor-cars passed in an unbroken stream with a steady grunting of horns, varied occasionally by a shrill, bird-like whistle. The street-cars clattered and whined, the trolley-pole of each one, apparently, always rattling off the wire at a junction point just in front of the house where two main avenues parted and where the wires formed a difficult Y. On a level with his own windows Bellsmith could see a gang of linemen in overalls, on a movable tower, cutting off limbs

of a tree with long, preposterous saws and gigantic shears. Even this was a common sight, for the Bellsmith elms, the only ones left on Main Street, caused endless trouble to the city's complex system of wires.

All this Bellsmith was conscious of, rather than observing. His actual attention was riveted on the article in "The Courier," which William, the butler, had handed him without a word when he had rung his bell.

At the first startled sight of his own name in relentless and jeering type at the head of the column, Bellsmith had been struck by a cold, sinking feeling, as from a blow in the pit of the stomach,—a nausea which tingled down to his very toes. Even when he and the others in the private dining-room had realized that the news of the fire had been genuine, it had never occurred to any of them that their own replies would be taken seriously. Too much occupied with getting home, taking stock of the damage, and quieting the servants, that side of the affair had been one which had been wholly driven from Bellsmith's attention. When, as he finally got into bed, the birthday party, taken in connection with this later catastrophe, had recurred to his mind, he had merely thought of it—a little anxiously, to be sure—as something about which too much had better not be said. But now, this! How much more did "The Courier" know—and intend to tell?

Of course, in reality, the worldly young men at "The Courier" office had never for an instant taken Bellsmith's remarks seriously. That is to say—well! From their point of view, that was, in fact, the very "juice" of the "story." Bellsmith would never have gone to

bed at all if he had known that, when a laughing reporter had outlined the telephone conversation, the night city editor had commanded, "Go to it! Eat it! Four-line head! Hold the presses if you have to, for the city edition."

In the days of Bellsmith Senior, no local paper would ever have dreamed of printing such a story, even if it had been far more convincing than it actually was, but the City of Leicester had grown beyond the oligarchy of the old families. "The Courier," in particular, was, if anything, out to swat the old families, especially if thereby the new families, represented by the foreign vote, would be pleased. Owned by "outside money," a syndicate in fact, "The Courier" was fighting the other papers for circulation and influence. Its imported editor was a misanthropic journalist of the metropolitan school (as it becomes metropolitan when it leaves New York), one of those newspaper men who feel it a duty, rather than otherwise, to hurt people's feelings. At any rate, he was a man who feared no one, least of all inactive Tories.

Yes, the head-lines were there all right, although, as usually happens in cases like this, something in Bellsmith kept crying out that they must be unreal—must be only one of those fantastic terrors which he was so constantly imagining for himself. Even now, after fifteen minutes, he kept his eyes glued to the letters, as if by mere staring he could make them grow dim. His hand convulsively twitched as if, with one sweep, it could wipe them away. He frantically felt that there must be some powerful effort of the will, some self-abasement per-

haps, by which he could really undo his act of the evening before. He knew very keenly now how a murderer feels the morning after his finger has inadvertently pulled the trigger.

Yet, curiously enough, he felt no resentment toward "The Courier" or the morbid young men responsible for the story. As most people do, Bellsmith instinctively thought of a newspaper as inexorable fate and of its reporters as shadows rather than individuals. If he blamed any one he blamed himself, for that was Bellsmith's real overwhelming emotion at this unhappy moment—a genuine sense of personal guilt—with something of dirt about it. In that feeling he had begun his adventure, and in that feeling he certainly seemed destined to end it.

In what is called the New England conscience there is a curious jumble of stern Mosaic morality, of petty commercial ethics, and of extreme personal fastidiousness. And probably the greatest of these is fastidiousness. Thus, like the Puritan of Puritans that he was, Arnold Bellsmith in no way connected his sense of guilt—perhaps contamination would be a better word—with Miss Marshall, with Tommy Knight, with the midnight punch, or even with his own violation of the Eighteenth Amendment. Those were all, in themselves, respectable enough. His sense of guilt somehow connected itself in his mind with that dirty alley leading to the stage-door and, in a lesser degree possibly, with the hard-faced girl, for neither of which was he in the least responsible. Just the same, the instinctive connection was there as he might have

known that it would be. If he had never seen either the alley or the girl this would never have happened.

But all this was later. These were the second thoughts of his reaction. Bellsmith's first act 'had been to look up from the head-lines to William, to observe his expression; but William at the moment had been deeply and ostentatiously busy with the window-shades and had left the room without even turning his face toward the bed. William had, in fact, for this occasion, put on his butler air *par excellence*—one might almost have said his illness-in-the-family expression.

William had now departed some time before. Bellsmith had read the article through, word by word and letter by letter, and had begun to read it a second time when there came a knock at his door. Trained as his ear was to every sound and every gradation of sound that made up his household routine, Bellsmith instantly noted something distinctly unfamiliar about the knock, and, as every trifle had always been prodigious to him, he at once began to speculate wildly about it. Then, supposing that William's knock might naturally be a little timid under the circumstances, he straightened up in bed with an assumed hearty air and called out, "Come in, William."

"It ain't William," replied a stern, rasping voice which was strangely familiar and yet unfamiliar.

Bellsmith hesitated, his hand instinctively reaching for the bell to call William to put himself between him and the world. Then realizing that the strange voice could not have reached his bedroom door without Wil-

liam's cognizance, if not his consent, he answered, a little uneasily, "Who is it?"

"It's me," replied the voice. "It's us. We're coming in."

"Oh, yes, Margaret," answered Bellsmith, straightening the bedclothes. "Yes, indeed, Margaret, come right in."

His heartiness was now genuine, but something told him that it was ill-timed; for immediately the door was slammed open and, to his utter amazement, what was apparently the entire cast of "Way Down East" streamed into the room. For a moment it occurred to him that his companions of the night before must have chosen this highly mistaken moment to carry on the revels and salute him with a burlesque consolation party. It took even Bellsmith a moment to realize that the four persons who entered in line and almost in lock-step were none but his own old and familiar servants—in their street clothes.

Bellsmith had never seen such a sight in his life as that group which marched in and lined up at the foot of his bed. At its head was a heavy and dowdy woman whom, even now, he could hardly recognize as Margaret, his old family cook. Margaret, to him, had always been a crotchety but highly respectable figure which had moved heavily, in blue gingham, between the bricked-in range in the basement kitchen and the dumb-waiter. She now stood before him a figure which could have walked on in vaudeville and brought down the house. She was wearing, principally, a long, black plush cape, imitating sealskin and heavily beaded, above

which appeared the fierce, red, intolerant face of a woman who knew her rights and intended to get them. Surrounding her face, her coarse, straggly, gray hair came out in defiant wisps from under a jaunty black hat on which a jet ornament nodded incessantly. Margaret had probably never taken a drink in her life, but, in that get-up she could never, by any chance, look completely sober.

Next to Margaret stood what was apparently a chorus girl, rather worse than those Bellsmith had seen the previous evening—a study in cheap furs, soiled lace, and brass jewelry. It proved to be Hecta, the laundress, dressed for the public eye, but, next to her, was the real surprise of the whole performance.

On Hecta's left stood a slender, demure, and remarkably aristocratic young woman who, in every detail of subdued refinement, might have been a young teacher from a quiet boarding-school, or might have just stepped from any electric brougham for a morning's shopping at the Woman's Exchange. A simple, perfectly tailored suit was daintily set off by an Eton collar and tiny starched cuffs. A plain sailor-hat matched exactly the suit, as did the rough-stitched English walking-gloves which its owner was wearing. A slender, rolled-up umbrella added the last detail of perfection. It really made Bellsmith embarrassed to see such a figure in his bedroom, although his slowly awakening consciousness was now vaguely able to recognize the young woman as merely Annie, the housemaid.

At the very end of the line stood the strangest figure

of all, the last comic touch. It was William, William clothed in the final word of cockney elegance—a light tan top-coat with big pearl buttons, a purple collar, a lavender tie, and carrying a light brown derby hat under his arm.

Small wonder that Bellsmith, at sight of that troupe, at the foot of his big mahogany bed, could not even laugh, could do nothing but draw his knees up under the sheets and stare.

"We're leaving. All of us. Now!" announced Margaret, as the spokesman and also, apparently, as the chaperon.

"So I see," said Bellsmith, vaguely; and the tenseness—the pathos, rather—of the moment was shown by the fact that no one laughed, not even he.

Having laid down their ultimatum, the servants merely stood and waited. Possibly, to their angry eyes, this twitchy, embarrassed man, under the embroidered covers, appeared as ridiculous as they did to his. But through Bellsmith's mind was passing a curious detached train of thought. His habitual mind kept telling him that here was a perfectly terrible state of affairs. His more natural mind, newly awakened, kept telling him that he didn't care an atom. There, again, was the New England conscience of it. This revolt didn't really alarm him in the least, but another side of his mind kept telling him that it *ought* to alarm him fearfully. What had happened that it no longer did? Was it the fact that "The Morning Courier" had supplied a disaster so numbing that all other disasters seemed trifling, negligible; or was it a sudden revealing

memory of that sociable moment with the night clerk at the Massapauk, buying cigars, and the novel, amazing realization of how many sociable night clerks, how many friendly Massapauks, and how many good cigars there would still be left in the world, no matter whether all the servants in the house left at once?

For months at a time Bellsmith had lived on tiptoes and in terror of just such a moment as this. A single ripple in the smooth currents of his household had always been one of those very things which, as he had so painfully described to the doctor, had given him whole hours of gloom. The very suggestion of the word "leaving" in connection with one of his servants had been sufficient to make him virtually ill. To his servants' whims he had yielded inch by inch as he had to his own, until their duties, like his, had been narrowed down to the lowest point of mere routine, to say nothing of efficiency. The house-maid and the laundress did whatever they pleased—so long as they left him alone. The cook was ill with imaginary diseases half of the time and nursing a grievance the rest. At least, that had been the report which Bellsmith had received through his successive butlers, for he had always been willing to go to any lengths of concession rather than face her himself. Only William had really worked capably, and it had not been his master but his own English training that had compelled him to do that. If any one had once suggested to William that all butlers did not work all the time he would have stopped. That idea merely had not occurred to him: that was all. Yet, bad as the servants had always been, Bell-

smith had lived daily in a nervous dread lest one of them should "give notice"; had monthly lightened their duties and daily placated their whims.

And now, to have them all leave at once, and at a time when events had made him more dependent than ever on the sanctuary of his own home! In one vivid picture Bellsmith saw the disordered kitchen downstairs with the fire going out and a loaf of stale bread on the table. He would have to send for plumbers and people to turn off the water and wander around in that maze of pipes known as the cellar. He saw beds unmade and halls undusted, furnace untended, linen unwashed, and, most of all, he visioned the sound of the door-bell pealing through the great vacant house with no faithful William to answer, to interpose his misleading face to the unwanted visitors who would be certain to come.

But it was no, no use, no use at all. Try as he would, Bellsmith could not get up any excitement about it. Possibly for the first time he realized how completely, since the evening before, his real interests had now gone elsewhere.

"We want our money!" demanded Margaret, to bring the matter to a head.

"All right," said Bellsmith casually.

In fact he said it so casually that it was like a dash of cold water over the group at the foot of the bed. Annie and Hecta looked at each other uncertainly. It made Bellsmith feel as if he had said something indelicate, something for which he should apologize. Instinctively he tried to smooth it over.

"You shall have your money whenever you wish it," he added, "but please tell me what is the matter."

Margaret had apparently been waiting for just that question.

"Matter indeed!" she shrieked convulsively, throwing back her head like an empress and, quite innocently, looking a little more drunk than ever. "'What's the matter,' he asks, and he lying there in the sheets. 'What's the matter?' he asks, and we being burned in our beds while he runs all over town shouting, 'To hell with them! Let them burn!'"

"Oh!" gasped Bellsmith, suddenly enlightened. Then it was not an economic issue but a moral one.

"Oh, yes, it's all very well for you to say, 'Oh,'" sneered Margaret, "but what did you say when we was all being toasted alive and every one of us with respectable families to read it out the first thing in the papers? Will I dare show my face again at St. Anthony's Church? Me living in a house like this and us being burned in our beds?"

Her delight in the grandeur of the phrase was so evident that even Bellsmith could not help smiling.

"But, Margaret," he remonstrated, "*you were n't* burned alive in your beds. And *I* did n't set the fire."

"Oh, no, you did n't *set* the fire," shrieked Margaret, who had evidently been whipping herself to this state for hours. "But you did n't care if it *was* set and all of us burned in our beds."

There was apparently some tremendous moral distinction between the disgrace of being burned in bed and being burned standing up. Even Bellsmith began

to grasp it. It was, after all, a picturesque figure, and he could really begin to see the curious, distorted sensation it gave the servants of being found in a house of social putrefaction with the walls torn off by "The Courier" and left naked to the public eye.

Slowly Bellsmith began to realize what had been going on in the kitchen the night before and this morning—the really heartless and scorching light with which that ridiculous newspaper story had struck upon four simple minds all trained in a traditional reverence for the printed page. He could see the gigglings, the screamings, the excited conferences in the kitchen fanned up by the violent Margaret until they had ended in this dramatic revolt. With the touchy dignity of typical servants, to whom nothing is dearer than dignity, they had taken the only course that seemed open to them and their honor. His servants had no real desire to leave. Their dignity merely wanted petting. They wanted their standing reassured. They were, in effect, a committee of the whole house. They wanted a retraction, something from headquarters, that they could carry to their constituents, over tea-cups and in the vestibule of St. Anthony's Church.

Retract, only deny that he had sent that message, apologize, and all would be well. Retract! But with that idea surged up a sudden and curious obstinacy in Bellsmith's mind, an obstinacy which he had never known before in his life, an obstinacy attributable to no known cause, not even to the New England conscience, an obstinacy attributable, probably, only to the fact that he was a Bellsmith—not Bellsmith but *a* Bellsmith. Pla-

cate, yes, but retract, no! He was damned if he would! Now that the idea came up, he was damned if he would retract to any one!

"Now, Margaret," he began calmly, "it seems to me that we can talk this thing out—" he almost was tempted to say "man to bell-boy," but smiled and finished with "—calmly."

The bold face of Margaret flashed up with defiance but, at his firm front, Hecta suddenly giggled nervously, William looked deferentially anxious, while Annie, blushing violently, looked at the floor. Yet none of them spoke.

"To begin with," continued Bellsmith, "if you all really want to go I don't suppose I can stop you. If you must, you must. In that case I shall merely close the house and go to the Mas—to one of the hotels."

Four faces before him grew very long. It was really more than Bellsmith could stand, and accordingly he added, "But of course I should hate to lose you."

The four faces brightened, and he continued. There were, after all, certain things one said at a time like this.

"Now, in all the time you have been here, have I ever given any one of you one single cause for complaint?"

He paused, looked up at them and waited. Hecta began to sniffle, the first to weaken.

"No, sir," she choked.

With growing confidence Bellsmith looked next at Annie, but Annie was still fiery red and her eyes were averted. William was non-committal, and Bellsmith did not dare look at Margaret. At the others, however,

he grinned with an abandon which he could not even try to explain.

"In other words," he said, "is n't it the truth that there is n't an easier place to work in town and that all of you know it? I've no objection, understand, but is n't it?"

Margaret opened her lips again in defiance, but Bellsmith caught her eye.

"Just a minute, Margaret," he commanded firmly, and, to his amazement, Margaret obeyed him.

This was beyond expectation. Even Margaret was impressed. From the four strained faces before him Bellsmith suddenly grasped the fact that these four persons were actually taking his gruffness at its face value. They believed it was real! But it was physically impossible for Bellsmith to be grim for more than a minute or two at a time.

"On the other hand," he continued, more naturally, "I have to admit that you all have been faithful and honest, that you have all made things very agreeable for me. I have appreciated it and should be sorry to see you go. If you have misunderstood anything that I have said—"

"No, damn it!" he suddenly affirmed to himself. "I will *not* retract—for the servants or any one else."

He paused rather vaguely, not knowing what to do, but, briefly as he had kept his control of himself, it had been a minute longer than the others had been able to do it. The strain had been too great, and the tension had suddenly snapped. Hecta began to sob openly, and her breakdown had its effect on the other women. Even

Margaret began to look dazed. Annie's hand was trembling visibly as it grasped the top of the slender umbrella, and William was wetting his lips. It was so upsetting to Bellsmith that he became actually brusque from sheer confusion.

"Has any one of you any real cause for complaint?" he repeated sharply.

At the end of the line, William cleared his throat painfully.

"Nao, sir, Mr. Bellsmith. Hi 'm sure we 'ev hall bean pairfeckly 'appy."

It was not once in a year that William deliberately fell back into cockney. It was not a slip with him, it was a pose; and when William fell back into cockney Bellsmith knew that he was getting sentimental. William somehow had the idea that it pleased his American masters to have him talk cockney. It was a pitiful overture, but Bellsmith knew that it was at least an overture. He felt himself weakening but checked the impulse.

"Here! This will never do," he commanded himself and hitched more erect than ever on the pillows.

"Well," he said quietly, "what do you intend to do?"

Fearfully, within, he looked up at the line, but not a hand stirred. A pin could have been heard to drop; then suddenly Hecta's sobs grew into wild, uncontrollable weeping. Thoroughly uncomfortable, Bellsmith looked from her to Annie and saw two tears creeping out from under her long, drooping lashes. Then suddenly, to his utter amazement, Margaret herself broke into huge, animal whoops. Great tears began to stream

over her coarse, red cheeks, while at the end of the line, even William was breathing audibly. And slowly over himself Bellsmith felt creeping a huge affection for these absurd, ignorant people of his who were really so dependent on his laugh or his frown. But he knew that he must not give way to it, that he must check himself before the scene became grotesque beyond limits. In a minute more the five of them would have been sobbing together.

For a long moment there was another tense and dramatic silence broken only by the sobbing of the women; then William turned to the door. He passed out into the hall and, suddenly realizing that they were alone in their master's bedroom, the three women turned in a panic and fled.

Bellsmith lay back on the pillows, and a look of slow wonder came over his face. For a minute he heard sobbing and then a sibilant, whispered conference down in the hall below. Silence fell and endured for twenty minutes, while Bellsmith lay there in tense anxiety.

Then slowly the normal sounds of life began to awaken and resound through the silent house. Far off in the kitchen a poker could be heard rattling cheerfully against the grates of the stove. A basket of silver was tossed out upon the dining-room table and sorted and counted. The firm, even steps of William passed through the lower hall to the door, to take in the mail. In the upper hall a vacuum-cleaner began to hum, and Bellsmith, with a sudden guilty recollection, realized that the delicate hand of Annie was running it. He wondered why he had never noticed before how dainty

and refined she was. And, with that thought, for the first time that morning—really for the first time, considering the fire—came a picture of another girl, excitingly feminine, facing him over a café table and in the darkened hall of a shabby hotel.

. . . , as the novelists say.

Softly William knocked at the door, then came in without a sign that a thing had happened.

“Your breakfast, Mr. Bellsmith!” he asked. “What would you care to have?”

“Oh, bless me, William,” sighed Bellsmith, “the doctor has given me orders to change all my habits. I am dying for half a grape-fruit, two pieces of toast, and some coffee. I suppose that that means that I ought to order tomato soup.”

“Very good, sir,” said William, without a smile, but Bellsmith called him back, laughing.

“Here, William! I was only joking. Bring up the grape-fruit as usual.”

CHAPTER XII

SO that was how "Nero" Bellsmith, also known in the clubs as "The Human Firebrand," came by his name and fame, a fame which was to last, possibly not as long as that of the original Nero, but certainly longer than that of any previous Bellsmith. Six silly words, spoken over a wire, had, as he was soon to find out, shaken the City of Leicester more deeply than all the ponderous speeches ever made in the national councils by his great-uncle, the congressman Bellsmith.

Long before Bellsmith was dressed the deluge broke. In fact, it would have broken at daylight if William had been in a state of mind to answer the downstairs telephone, the only instrument in the house which was allowed to ring before Bellsmith rose in the morning. Then, in incessant stream, came calls at the door—from reporters; from an officer of the Pilgrim Trust Co., which managed the Bellsmith estate; from adjusters of the fire insurance companies; from the city fire-marshal himself; from agents selling extinguishers and new safety styles of heating systems; from hopeful contractors; from interior decorators specializing on the artistic rich; from a leering bootlegger scenting trade; from a junk-dealer ready to make a bid on the damaged pipe, the damaged furniture, or the whole damaged house, for that matter; and finally from a plain-clothes

policeman sent at the instigation of the trust company to keep away all the others.

On the telephone came calls of a more hesitant nature but in such unbroken sequence that the receiver was hardly on its hook before the bell rang again. There were calls from middle-aged women, "old friends of the family" who pretended to be solicitous about the mere fire, as such, but who were really curious to see whether Bellsmith himself was in any condition to answer. There were calls from one or two younger women and one or two hearty little men—social climbers, in both cases,—who had only the most casual acquaintance with Bellsmith but now made an elaborate and effusive show of rallying around in this hour of trial ("You poor, dear chap," from the women; "Is there anything I can do for you old man?" from the men), expecting, of course, their own pay later in the social coin of a grateful and cemented friendship.

There were calls from older men of a heavier type and a solid position who rang him up from their offices in what even they themselves believed to be a sincere concern but what was really an unresisted temptation to let their offices know that they were on common, if not necessarily friendly, terms with this famous young *Harry Dashwood*.

There were anonymous calls from pay-stations which began, "Do you know who this is?" then ended abruptly with suddenly timorous feminine giggles. There were calls from cranks, insane persons, and all that indescribable army of individuals who, for no apparent reason, rush to any spot where notoriety has, for the mo-

ment, pitched its tent, until, about noon, at William's suggestion, Keefe was called from the stables to disconnect the wires.

For three days, in fact, Bellsmith had all the disagreeable experiences of fame with none of its thrills, but even the waves that broke on his door-step were only the outer foam of a flood of bewilderment and laughter which was sweeping over the city.

On Bellsmith, in short, had descended a fame of that kind which most dearly tickles the human fancy, even the fancy of those whom it shocks—the kind of fame which seeps into every nook and cranny of municipal life. Old ladies whispered over him in their drawing-rooms, loafers argued over him in the cellars and stone-quarries which had succeeded bar-rooms. Men laughed over him at the clubs, across the counter, and through the cashier's window at banks and brokerage houses. Stenographers and girls at white-goods counters cudgelled their brains to see whether or not they could remember what he looked like. If Bellsmith had gone to the Lyceum Theater on the night following his infamous declaration of independence—and been recognized—the audience would almost have stood up and cheered.

For that was the strangest part of it all. Instead of arousing indignation, his profligate words had made him a sort of popular hero. For some ridiculous reason, even the cautious and conservative City of Leicester (than which no city on earth is more appreciative of insurance and property values) saw something magnificent in the picture of a wealthy young man, slightly tottering, consigning his ancestral home to the flames.

Except of course the old ladies. Remembering his father, his grandfather, and especially his aunts, Miss Lucille Bellsmith and Miss Mary (the only two persons in Leicester permitted, in their day, to have a liveried footman on the box of their carriage without the stigma of bad taste)—remembering Miss Lucille and Miss Mary, the old ladies thought it all thoroughly frightful.

Of course the hundred-odd thousand persons in Leicester who did not know him assumed at once, as "The Courier" had intended that they should assume, that Bellsmith had been—well, at least decidedly merry on synthetic gin when he had spoken the famous words. The one or two in a thousand who really did know him or knew something of the family recalled that he had always been "queer" and wondered whether he had at last slipped over the edge. A few intuitive souls, a very few, maintained that there was "something behind this which has n't come out," and wondered very actively what it might be.

This latter view acquired what appeared to be a very substantial foundation from a most unfortunate sequel. As has been mentioned, the Pilgrim Trust Co., which managed the Bellsmith estate, on the morning after the fire sent a very suave and very high officer post-haste to the old Bellsmith mansion to make diplomatic inquiries, of Bellsmith himself if he should happen to be around, or, if not, of the family doctors whom the trust company fully expected to find in attendance.

Bellsmith received the caller courteously but with such nervousness and in such a spirit of obstinate evasion that the visitor became more alarmed than ever. In

fact, from that interview the high, suave officer gained nothing except perplexity and chagrin. Bellsmith calmly admitted his words but flatly refused to give any explanation whatsoever, and the thoroughly shaken banker hastened back to an agitated conference at the Pilgrim Trust. The result of this conference was one of those regrettable instances of making a bad matter worse to which high, suave officers of conservative institutions are only too prone, when trying to cover up regrettable incidents.

The Pilgrim Trust Co., in short, took it on itself to insert in the evening paper, "The Leicester Tribune and Press" (on which the Pilgrim Trust Co. held a large mortgage), a guarded statement "from a friend close to Mr. Bellsmith," which hinted that Mr. Bellsmith had been wholly misquoted and that his remarks had been cheaply distorted by the sensation-loving "Courier."

This statement implied guardedly that Mr. Bellsmith, so far from being "a man of pleasure," was really a nervous invalid whose strength had never allowed him to enter active life, either business or social. It pointed out that for years the Bellsmith family had been accustomed to maintain apartments at the hotel in question to which they retired periodically for rest and seclusion from household cares. It suggested that the only foundation for the ridiculous story was that Mr. Bellsmith, having been for some time in a state verging on "nervous collapse," being naturally upset (it didn't say hysterical) at the news of the fire and impatient to get to the scene, had had "little patience or time to waste

on a series of ridiculous and impertinent questions put to him at such an inopportune moment."

Ah! this is all very well, thought Leicester, on reading what "The Tribune and Press" had to say about the affair. All Leicester knew as well as "The Tribune and Press" that "The Courier" was owned by "outside money" and would never spare a good citizen to spoil a good story, but just the same where there was all that smoke there must be some fire, not all of it caused by that "defective smoke pipe."

The honor and veracity of "The Courier" now being openly challenged, it hotly sent a reporter directly to Bellsmith, who certainly liked this new picture of himself no better than the one presented by "The Courier." Bellsmith coldly scorned the loop-hole offered him by the Pilgrim Trust through "The Tribune and Press." He obstinately affirmed to friend and enemy alike that he had been correctly quoted by "The Courier," which vindication was printed exultantly on its first page by "The Courier" on the following morning.

Beyond that statement, however, Bellsmith flatly refused to give one word of explanation to "The Courier" or any one else, at which "The Leicester Advocate," a moribund sheet which only employed two reporters and rarely got a chance at a live new story, saw its own opportunity for a little "desk work" and raised the academic question whether, in the circumstances, the Bellsmith estate could collect a cent of insurance.

To pad this inquiry into the proportions of a first-page story, "The Advocate" got interviews with half

the prominent lawyers and insurance men in the city, most of whom were forced to admit, between chuckles, that, unless it could be proved in open court that Leicester's own Nero had actually set, instigated, incited, fanned, aided, abetted, or been otherwise cognizant of the origin of the fire, or unless it could be proved by competent witnesses that he had deliberately and wilfully hampered efforts to check it, the insurance companies would have to take their medicine. Judge Harmon, for instance, who loved his little legal joke as only an old-school lawyer can, even went so far as to cite precedents—"Mass. Reports"; Vol. XXXVIII, Phoenix Insurance Co. of Liverpool, England *vs.* Reed, and also "Federal Reports"; Vol. CIX, State of Connecticut *vs.* Delaney.¹

While the newspapers, with a lively appreciation of the news value both of profligate wealth and of "local interest," were waging this legal and hypothetical battle, current gossip at luncheons, in offices, in pool-rooms and in clubs was building up a fictitious history of poor Bellsmith that would have amazed him. It was, moreover, "The Courier's" conception of Bellsmith and not the Pilgrim Trust Co.'s which was accepted by popular acclaim. The public mind had pictured him in a certain character and was rigidly determined that he should live up to it.

The very seclusion in which the Bellsmith family had

¹ At the risk of losing entirely the element of suspense, it might as well be stated at once that the ultimate amount involved in the Bellsmith case was \$52.84, no claim being made for services of regular employees in the house, and that this was promptly paid on the filing of the customary papers.

always lived, the very mystery which had always hung over the gloomy old house on Main Street, only made Bellsmith a more likely subject. In the case of a rich man about whom nobody knew very much, anything might be possible—and probably was. One harmless collision which his touring-car had had with a bridge on an icy evening ten years before was now raked up from the memory of some policeman and was even guardedly mentioned in "The Courier" as a wild midnight exploit. To this conception, the personality of Keefe, the chauffeur, "formerly well known as a dare-devil race driver and now a prominent figure in local prize-ring circles," lent itself magnificently. One got the idea that Keefe could tell many a tale about furtive road-houses and chorus ladies if his natural loyalty to his dashing master had not sealed his lips. Incidentally Keefe himself did nothing to dispel this illusion.

The simple fact that Bellsmith had ridden daily in the parks for a year or two in English riding-clothes, and that he was almost the only man in Leicester to ride at all, made him equally, for journalistic purposes, a "well-known horseman." His perfunctory membership in the clubs also made him a "club-man," the most deadly suggestive word in the newspaper vernacular. By skillfully putting such words together, "The Courier," to which Bellsmith's sin had now become a matter of personal honor, did not actually *say* that he wore check suits and drove four-in-hand to the races, but that was certainly the picture left in the mind of the casual reader.

To know Bellsmith at all, which few men in Leicester

did, came to give one a sort of vicarious glamour. These few genuine intimates, and many who were not really intimates in any sense of the word, were besieged with questions as to "What kind of a chap is he really?" Hence, lacking facts, imagination set to work without any one's really knowing that it was imagination. Old stories of which other men had actually been the heroes were attributed to Bellsmith. His college days were ransacked for picturesque incidents, and some of those old perennial campus fables which are tacked upon one famous graduate after another were tacked upon Bellsmith by men who, at college, had barely known him by sight, to the bewildered disgust of the few men in Leicester who actually did remember him as the quietest man who had ever entered Yale University. Even these, in the end, had to appease their own uncertainty with the aphorism, "You never can tell. When they *do* start, the quiet chaps are always the worst."

"There's another man who never drank a drop in his life before prohibition," was probably the commonest way of putting it.

CHAPTER XIII

FOR three days the storm of bewilderment and of laughter raged over the city of Leicester, and then it ended as foolishly as it had begun. On Friday night in "The Advocate" the "Bellsmith story" was relegated to an inner page, and by Saturday morning some knotty problem of municipal politics, involving the paving of Grand Street, had arisen to drive it out of sight entirely.

SAYS CITY MULCTED FIFTY THOUSAND IN GRAND STREET DEAL: MULCAHY

blazed "The Courier" clear across its front page in letters even larger than those given to Bellsmith. It was apparently major tactics with "The Courier" to inveigle some prominent simpleton into making some preposterous statement, especially one involving large sums of money. Anyway, there was something else for "The Tribune and Press" to deny on Saturday night.

During those three days, however, Bellsmith remained in his own house strictly in seclusion, locked in the Vatican. That had been the 1870 method of acting in the face of disaster or disgrace, and no other course ever occurred to Bellsmith. Even pulling up stakes and running off to Atlantic City or Pinehurst would not have been the same thing—not at all the same thing. That

would have lacked the essence of the grand gesture, of stoicism in the face of shame. One drew into one's shell, to be sure, but the shell must remain there, dignified, stony, never budging an inch, where all Main Street and all Leicester could see it if they chose, although it was better form not to look.

As one got used to the thing it was not so bad. Indeed, as the days went on and the tension relaxed it was almost jolly—rather like being bottled up in a siege or isolated in a country house during a snowstorm. After the telephone wires were disconnected and the plain-clothes policeman went on duty at the iron fence not a soul came near the door; not even from the Pilgrim Trust; and in the ensuing quiet a spirit of mild, chaste hilarity began to run through the house. The five inmates had never been so close to one another as they were in those days. At night, on the second day, William put candles and flowers on the table for dinner and turned off the electric bulbs. There was no birthday cake, but one felt that there ought to be. Just what the connection was it would be difficult to say, but the effect was undeniable.

The plain-clothes policeman, especially, kept up the sense of siege, of dramatic importance. Even Bellsmith used to take mild satisfaction in watching him out by the gate. Sometimes Keefe, in a spirit of gruff, diffident etiquette, would come around from the stables and lean beside him against the iron fence, but every half-hour or so the policeman would come in the front door to get warm, and then he became William's peculiar property. At regular intervals all day long in the

silence of the great house, Bellsmith, from his room upstairs, could hear William's bantering, unofficial tones as he opened the door for the man of the law and then the rumbling, non-committal tones of the latter replying.

For a long time, sitting idly in the hall above, Bellsmith kept wondering what was so strangely familiar about the officer's voice. Then suddenly he realized that the policeman talked in perfect musical "fourths," supremely bass. In his first two words of a sentence the policeman's abysmal tones invariably struck deepest E, then contra A then back to E—exactly the motif of a man tuning a bull fiddle.

Sometimes when he went to the door to admit their guardian William would playfully keep the huge door partly closed on its big brass chain and cautiously hurl a mock challenge:

"Halt! Who goes there?"

To this the officer would answer (deepest E):
"Frinds!"

"Pass, frinds!" from William.

The chain would rattle out of its socket, and Bellsmith would hear the two pass down the hall to the servants' dining-room for a cup of tea on William's part and a cup of coffee on the part of the officer—"black and tan," they came to call it. That policeman left a strong impression on William's life. For months afterward, if any question of criminal law or police methods arose, he was always ready with a decisive and authoritative answer.

On Friday night the plain-clothes man appeared in the library, with his hat in his hand and his hair water-

brushed, to say that there seemed to be no further use for his services. On Saturday morning Bellsmith got a bill for his hire.

CITY OF LEICESTER

Comptroller's Office		Division of Public Safety			
Bellsmith Estate, 1091 Main Street.					
		Dr.	Total.	Audit.	Grand Total.
By Police Officer					
3 da	@ \$4.80	\$14.40	\$14.40	\$14.40	\$14.40
Received Payment,					

At intervals all day long Bellsmith rejoiced in that bill. It was such a novel idea—"By one policeman, so much; by one detective, so much more." And policemen came so surprisingly cheap, too. Why would n't it be fun to keep one all the time? He wondered how much a fireman would cost.

The newspapers, night and morning, added the other principal excitement of the day. Bellsmith had intended firmly not even to look at these, but he would have broken William's heart if he had n't. As early as three o'clock in the afternoon William would begin to get nervous, and at half-past three he would creep out to a little drug-store on a parallel avenue behind the house where he could get the evening papers as soon as the bundle was thrown off the street-car. It was probably the only case in the history of the world where a bundle of papers, in a manila wrapping, was daily carried into a drug-store by an English butler in good standing.

Nevertheless the days were long, and as the silent

hours began to beget a lonelier feeling, Bellsmith found his mind turning with greater frequency back to the Massapauk and Tommy Knight's birthday party—and the night clerk. It was a sentimental memory, one that he liked to recall, but, like most sentimental memories, this one had acquired its poisoned sting. Why must it always be so—turtle soup and then nausea? Why could n't those things be arranged separately? Why, for instance, could n't the sting come first, say before one was twenty?

The first afternoon was the worst, for reading then offered little consolation. Bellsmith was too nervous to sit still. From lunch-time until the winter shadows began to fall he sat moodily by the upper front windows, until the street outside became cold and drear, until the shoppers in steady procession began to turn up their coat collars and lean forward into the wind, until hard, white little lights, more depressing than the twilight itself, began to flash forth from shop-windows.

About five o'clock, as William began to whistle softly down in the dining-room and as Annie passed through the hall with taper and scepter to light the vestibule gas, Bellsmith found himself edging guiltily toward the telephone in the little room over the front door which had once been a governess-room. The wires were still disconnected, but it would do no harm to look up the number.

MASSAPAUK, Hotel, Priv. Exchg., Center 1100.

For several minutes in the twilight Bellsmith sat staring at that senseless line, and as he stared the letters seemed to assume a personal, individual appearance. He felt himself back in the hot, close air of the Massapauk dining-room, and there came to him a strong scent of violets. Curious, for Miss Marshall had not worn violets. But some one must have.

On that occasion that was as far as he got but, on the following evening, thoughts began to form themselves in his mind of writing a note. He began to word it in his imagination—simple, detached, avoiding all issues:

My dear Miss Marshall:

It is hardly necessary for me to tell you that I regret as much as you must the extremely unfortunate sequel——

But there he was—plunging right into the midst of it.

If Arnold Bellsmith had grown, with years, into a state in which he could stand debating for hours whether to put on his right shoe or his left, whether to read Ruskin or Chaucer, it is hardly strange that he was completely uncertain about the tremendous affair which had come on him now; that is, Miss Marshall's part in it; how he felt about her and especially why now he felt this stiffening reluctance to write to her or call her up. Naturally his was a mind to probe into every shade of his own emotions, to attempt to pin them all down and compare them, but he had not yet reached a stage of ruthlessness where such a self-examination could be of much use—not while he remained a Bellsmith.

One might as well, however, be honest, even if Bell-

smith was not. Of course he had, very strongly, a feeling that he himself had dragged Miss Marshall into a disgraceful mess—one which the sensitiveness of her professional pride would make only more detestable. "Was seen dining that evening with two young ladies of the company." "The Courier" had put a sneer into those words "young ladies," and Jules, at least, besides the members of the company, knew who was meant. By now, of course, Miss Marshall must have a saner version of the story, from Tommy Knight or the curly-haired stage-manager, but, even at that, Bellsmith could hardly blame her if she was still bitterly angry at him, or contemptuous.

Bellsmith, in fact, almost wished that he could be sure that she *was* bitterly angry at him. That at least would take the matter out of his hands. The real truth was that he almost liked to believe that idea, put the whole issue on such an obvious plane; for Bellsmith could not wholly deceive himself by the idea that Miss Marshall's possible anger was what kept him away from her.

Try as he would to fight out the idea, and wholly unjust as he knew it to be, there still persisted within him that faint sense of unpleasantness in connection with the whole affair, that shrinking fastidiousness which, for want of a better symbol, he connected in his imagination with that dirty alley leading to the stage-door.

Even to think of Miss Marshall still excited him as the thought of no other human being on earth had ever excited him, but still, there it was! The dirt of the alley even clung to her innocent skirts. This was Bellsmith

at his best and his worst, instinctively fine or instinctively contemptible. One can take one's choice. But something within him gripped his arm as in a vise of steel every time he sat down to write that letter or sat down to call on the telephone.

On both occasions, after the futile and frail little fight, he went to the grand piano in the old long drawing-room and played for an hour in the dusk, vaguely remembering snatches from "Eleanor" and building them up into elaborate improvisations. They were far better than the original score of "Eleanor" had ever been, for Bellsmith had not told half the truth to Dr. MacVickar. If he was nothing else he was a fine and profound musician.

After that, on the first evening and on the second, he sat in his library reading the evening paper which William had left there hours before, not reading his own vindication or accusation but furtively seeking out the odd columns of theatrical news. He saw nothing, not even a review of "Eleanor" at this mature date in the two-weeks' engagement, but he painfully read the stereotyped publicity items about little actresses of whom he had never heard and about actors whom he would have detested if he could ever have seen them.

And the evening paper trembled nervously in his hand.

CHAPTER XIV

ON Monday the siege was lifted by a note from Dr. MacVickar. The doctor wrote, as he usually did, on a sheet torn from his prescription-pad and began without introduction:

Look here, young man, I thought that you promised to come to my office every day. I am saving 4:30 for you this afternoon and if you don't appear I will summons you for contempt or send the police ambulance to get you.

"He carn't do it," commented William who, in due course of time, gathered in the discarded note and read it to the cook. "Naobody can order out the hambulance except the leftenant in charge of the station. For contagious cases they have a special one drawn by 'orses."

In one of those innocent postscripts artfully added so as to appear casual but really to contain the kernel of the letter, the doctor added:

P.S. Last Tuesday seems to have shown a heavy casualty list among my patients. Your friend Miss Marshall has been laid up all the week and unable to appear but she at least had the decency to let me know.

Bellsmith laid down the note at the spot from which

it was later retrieved by William, who already had his eye on it.

"By the way, William," he said, "has Keefe connected that telephone yet?"

"Yes, sir," said William. "A man from the company came around Saturday night and said how about it?"

Bellsmith knew this as well as William, but on occasions of this kind it is just as well to appear brisk and officious. As if a bothersome and vexatious business matter had just arisen, he sauntered up to the telephone in the governess-room and took up the telephone-book.

"Center eleven hundred, please. . . . Hello. May I speak to Miss Tilly Marshall?"

A moment later Miss Marshall's voice came to him over the wire, startlingly familiar, and not at all, moreover, the wan voice of an invalid.

"Miss Marshall? This is Arnold Bellsmith."

"Who?"

"Arnold Bellsmith."

At that Miss Marshall's voice did freeze a little. "Oh."

Bellsmith hurried on. "I have just heard that you have been laid up all the week."

"Yes," answered Miss Marshall, dryly.

Bellsmith hemmed around vaguely for something to say. "Well, are you—are you able to get out now?"

The voice laughed. "Oh, goodness, yes!"

"Well, then—I wonder—could I come to see you?"

"I don't see why not. People have."

Bellsmith hesitated again. "Er—you see—I thought

that you might be a little angry at me. I was rather afraid to face you."

"But, my dear man, even so, what could I possibly do to you?"

With a laugh Bellsmith cautiously went a little further. "I wonder—I mean, is n't there somewhere else that we can go besides the Massapauk?"

Miss Marshall laughed again, a little less coldly. "The tainted spot?" she suggested, and Bellsmith had to laugh with her.

The laugh did them both good, and both voices went on more naturally.

"Well, how would you like to go motoring for a while?"

"I should like it very much."

"In about an hour, then? About half-past two?"

"Half-past two. Very good, my lord."

As Bellsmith's car drove up to the Massapauk, Miss Marshall was waiting on the old-fashioned sandstone steps.

"By rights," she exclaimed, as she clambered into the car, "I should have kept you waiting for a long time inside, but you see I had pity on you. I knew you did n't want to face the bell-boys."

"And I thank you for that," said Bellsmith, his hand still on the door. "Where do you want to go?"

"My dear Mr. Bellsmith," replied Miss Marshall, "it's your city, not mine."

Bellsmith leaned forward to Keefe, who cocked an attentive ear. "You might drive up through the parks, Keefe. It is n't too muddy, is it?"

"No, sir, I think not."

As they started off, Miss Marshall looked around the soft interior of the gray limousine with a piquant admiration. "You do do things with a certain chaste elegance, don't you? As you came up you looked quite like an advertisement in 'Vogue.'"

Suddenly she dropped her bantering tone and turned to him quickly. "Why have n't you come to see me all the week?"

Bellsmith looked uncomfortably at the robe-rail in front of him.

"I felt," he said, blushing hotly, and not with any too great conviction, "that you would never want to see me again, that I had dragged you into a horrible mess."

"Nonsense!" said the girl. "Pete Surdam told me all about it the next morning. He and Tommy Knight felt very badly about it. Really they did. Did n't one of them call you up? They said they were going to."

Bellsmith shook his head. "No, I have seen no one for a week. I even had the telephone wires and the door-bell disconnected."

Miss Marshall looked at him. "Not really! Smelling-salts too? And straw on the pavement?"

Bellsmith laughed painfully. "I suppose that I *am* the biggest fool that ever lived."

Miss Marshall broke in abruptly. "Look here. Who started that idea, you or the doctor?"

Bellsmith looked at her in surprise. "What idea?"

Miss Marshall found it rather harder to explain than she had expected.

"Some one," she began, "seems to have launched a

campaign to make you out an imbecile. You even seem to be convinced of it yourself. So few men are. And you really *are n't* an imbecile, you know."

A horrifying idea had been implanted in Bellsmith's mind.

"Did the doctor say that?" he demanded.

Miss Marshall laughed evasively, but Bellsmith insisted.

"Well," she admitted at last, "before you came 'behind' that first night the doctor did write me a note in which he said that you might appear to me as 'the biggest fool that was ever born.'"

"Well, I have," concluded Bellsmith.

Miss Marshall tapped her fingers to her lips in a little mock yawn. "If you really must say things like that," she begged, "please save them and say them to some one else. There are so many people who *like* to talk that way."

Bellsmith, however, was sitting moodily. The words did not seem a laughing matter to him, and Miss Marshall wished that she had never repeated them.

"What are you going to do to the doctor," she demanded, "for saying that?"

"Nothing. It's true."

Miss Marshall waited a minute until she saw that he actually felt that it was; then she tapped his sleeve with her fingers.

"Now, come," she insisted. A moment later she added. "Here. Please hold my hand. I think it will do you good. And heaven knows it will me."

Awkwardly Bellsmith put his hand over her fingers.

They were well-gloved little fingers—stitched English with heavy outside seams—and he did have to admit that a thrill ran up and down his arm. As they sat in silence, the girl added thoughtfully:

“Now that I know, by the papers, what a young, er, Lycurgus you are—Lycurgus is n’t the word I mean. What is it? I mean oodles.”

“Mæcenas?” suggested Bellsmith, absently.

“Mæcenas is right,” said the girl. “Now that I know what a young Mæcenas you are, I suppose you will think that I am setting my cap at you.

“And,” she added, musingly, “I suppose that I am.” She paused again. “However, you need n’t worry. It will never be.”

“Why not?” asked Bellsmith.

Miss Marshall laughed. “‘Why not?’ is correct, but please don’t say it in that tone of relief. Why not? Because it is written in the annals of fate that no member of the Marshall family shall ever be remotely associated with any one who has one nickel to clank against another. Time and again I have sat in my little window and seen a dollar apparently coming right at me, head on, and I have said to myself, ‘Hello! Hello! can this really be for little me?’ But when the dollar gets near me it simply says, ‘No, no, old dear, you were right the first time. I merely wanted to ask you where John D. Rockefeller lives.’ No, my lord, there is a special fate sitting over my head keeping tabs, and it gives the order, ‘No Marshall has ever known what it is to be out of debt, and by George, if I have anything to say about it, no Marshall ever shall!’ ”

Bellsmith smiled, but not because it was funny.

"You speak of the Marshalls," he began. "And may I ask—?"

"Ah!" said the girl, "I was wondering when that was coming, and I have my answer all ready. In other words, how does it come that I, apparently a poor working-girl in such humble surroundings, am able to sparkle with such brilliancy and give all the talk of the town and the musical glasses? Well, I will tell you. The first Marshall was knighted by Henry VIII—'Henry was a good king and ruled the people wisely.' This Marshall was known as the 'Scourge of Northumberland'—'Scourge the First.'"

But, as she was accustomed to do, the girl broke off abruptly and her tone became wholly natural. "No, my father was a man named Tom Marshall. I assume that you have never heard of him."

"Yes, I have," replied Bellsmith. "He was a basso singer. Somewhere in the house I have got a signed picture of him."

"Not really!"

"I think so. Possibly it was only a reproduction. My father was a great admirer of his."

He did not add that his father's collection included photographs of virtually every musician between the years 1861 and 1897, and when he came to look it up, sure enough, it was only a photograph in a book that he had remembered.

"If I am not mistaken," he added, "it was in costume of—you know—'The Daughter of the Regiment.'"

"It may have been," said the girl. "'Friar Tuck' was what he did best."

"Was n't he also in grand opera?"

"Yes, for a while," said the girl, guardedly. "I might as well tell you," she added, "that my father was n't a very nice person. He politely abandoned my mother and me in England when I was three years old."

"Rather rough," commented Bellsmith.

"Quite rough," assented the girl.

"What happened?"

"The usual. My mother had been on the stage, and she had to go back again. She was a friend of Celestine Trip, and that is how I happened to enter *this* charmed circle. But, at that time, I was just a baby, so I was parked in a boarding-school in Belgium for years and years and years."

"Hence the sparkle?" suggested Bellsmith. "Hence Lycurgus?"

"Hence Lycurgus," agreed the girl, "and all the other names of which I have n't really the slightest knowledge but which I throw out gaily when bent on making an impression."

"Would—would you care to tell me any more?" asked Bellsmith.

"How nicely you said that," said the girl, and her air was genuine.

"But after Belgium?" suggested Bellsmith.

"'After Belgium, what?'" echoed the girl. "That sounds like a lecture or something, does n't it? Well, then my mother was private secretary to one of the Grauschs—the light opera people."

Bellsmith nodded.

"And that brought us back to America where we had started from in the first place. And then my mother gave music lessons to children and coached bad actors in how to walk across a drawing-room. Then Little Rose-blossom went on the stage to earn her daily bread, which brings us down to the opening of our story."

"How long ago was that?"

"Five years."

"Is your mother—?"

"No, she's not," said the girl abruptly. "Mother was a dear."

With a grinding of tires on gravel, the car came to a sudden stop. Keefe looked around inquiringly and, through the heavy glass in the windows ahead of them, they saw the gates of the park with a chain drawn across them.

"I guess the park is closed, after all," remarked Bellsmith. "Where would you care to go now?"

The girl shrugged.

"I only wish," said Bellsmith, "that there was some peaceful place where we could go and sit—inside. I don't feel at all like tea at a hotel, do you?"

The girl smiled. "How could I, after that?" She had a sudden inspiration. "How would you like to watch a rehearsal of the show?"

"I'd like it very much," said Bellsmith. "Is there one?"

"Yes, of bits and pieces. They've got a man up from

New York to arrange some dances. We can go there and sit if you feel like it."

Bellsmith gave directions, and the car turned slowly around.

"Do you have to rehearse?" he asked.

The girl shook her head. "They let me off. I've got to go on to-night, though. Poppy Vaughn has been playing my part."

"I can't imagine it," said Bellsmith.

"She's not bad at all."

They rode back toward the city for a time in silence. Bellsmith again took the girl's hand. It had been jerked away automatically when Keefe had turned around.

"Then you *have* been laid up?" began Bellsmith again.

"Oh, yes," said the girl. "I suppose that I *could* have gone on, but I was rather a mess on Wednesday morning. Dr. MacVickar came over to the hotel, like an angel, and really convinced the manager that they'd have a dead soubrette on their hands if I did n't lay off for a few days."

"But what is it?"

"Just nerves."

"Dr. MacVickar is quite a wonder at that. What does he say is the cause?"

"He does n't *have* to say. You yourself always know really what is the matter with nerves."

"Worry?" suggested Bellsmith. "Troubles?"

"Of course," said the girl.

"But what kind of troubles?"

"I've told you," said the girl. "There is only one kind of trouble in the world."

"Money?" asked Bellsmith.

The girl nodded. "Is n't it true?"

Bellsmith did not reply for a moment. Then he said slowly, "Yes, I suppose that it is."

He added later, "But you don't mean—?"

"Oh, heavens, no!" broke in the girl. "I'm not starving or anything of that kind. You don't suppose I'd tell you if I were? In fact, I've got a very good job, as long as it lasts. But then, when that ends, it begins all over again." She shivered impatiently, and it needed no Dr. MacVickar to see that the poor child really was in very bad shape. "It's so damned endless!" she exclaimed, bitterly.

"But what happens," asked Bellsmith, "when you are not—not playing? In the summer, for instance."

"In the summer it's stock, if I can get it," said the girl. "Oh, don't get the wrong idea. There are always three or four old musical people, or actors, that I call 'aunt' or 'uncle' and where I can always go. But, just the same, that leaves me a lot of latitude for pitying myself, does n't it?"

She was silent for a moment and then squeezed his hand. "You were a big help the other night."

"I don't know why," said Bellsmith.

"No more do I," said the girl, "for heaven knows you're not handsome. But you were."

But Bellsmith's face had set in a curious rigidity. Once or twice he wet his lips and tried to speak. The girl had been looking moodily out of the window at

the rows of shingled, two-family houses, all alike, which made up that end of town, but suddenly she turned and saw him. Quietly she withdrew her hand from his and placed it on his arm. Suddenly she became entirely another person, one he had never seen. Her voice was gentle and composed.

"Now look here," she said firmly. "I know perfectly well what is going on in your mind. And you're a dear and I love you for it. But don't! Please don't. I mean that. I can joke about—about what you are thinking. But you mustn't say it. I like you very much—to have you around to weep on your shoulder, but—"

"Don't you like me any other way?" asked Bellsmith.

"I'd be an utter liar if I said that I didn't," answered the girl.

"Then why—?" began Bellsmith.

"I don't *know* why," insisted the girl, "but when I see you getting like that, something within me just steels me right up. I suppose that it must be some innate sense of decency."

Bellsmith was silent, and the girl must have been right; for he did feel a curious half relief. They rode on in silence until the car stopped in front of the theater.

"But anyway," said Bellsmith, "we have all the rest of the week."

"Why, so we have!" said the girl. "That's something. Then George to his muttons. That really does n't mean anything, but it sounds as if it might."

CHAPTER XV

INSIDE the Lyceum Theater a single reflector bulb on a metal upright furnished the only light for the stage, on which fifteen or twenty men and women in street clothes were gathered in informal groups. Three or four long, hooded lamps like glow-worms gave a subdued, yellow fringe over the music racks of the orchestra, but between these and the entrance the whole auditorium was in darkness. From a fire exit in the balcony a long, thin shaft of daylight filtered in, dancing incessantly with millions of tiny dust motes, the pale, gray streamer of afternoon light appearing curiously out of place and intrusive. As Miss Marshall and Bellsmith tiptoed in from the lobby a single voice was speaking from somewhere in the darkness near the stage, giving directions with that empty, resounding effect of informal talk in a vacant auditorium.

The new-comers slipped into seats in the darkness of the back row, and a moment later the directing voice broke off in a brisk—

“All ready, now!”

The orchestra leader rose, silhouetted in the faint glow at the edge of the stage, and the groups beyond him began shuffling together into lines, but before they were formed another voice called cheerfully from the darkness:

"Say! Can't we have some more light here? What is this, anyway, a dark scene?"

A dutiful and perfunctory little wave of laughter ran over the groups on the stage: there was a bustle by some one toward one of the wings; then slowly the rows of footlights came melting on, bringing all the performers into sudden clearness and seeming to warm the whole house even back to where Miss Marshall and Bellsmith were sitting. The men and women in street clothes behind the foot-lights and in front of the mellow, trellised garden scene which was now disclosed gave curious effects when contrasted with the costumes in which Bellsmith had seen the same people the previous week. In civilian dress the chorus people, for the most part, appeared very much younger, mere boys and girls. On the other hand, those of the principals who were present appeared very much older than they had in costume.

"Now, then!" ordered the directing voice, which still came from the darkness.

The orchestra leader brought down his baton, and the skeleton orchestra in attendance broke into a fox-trot tune which Bellsmith remembered from his previous view of the performance. The chorus people moved forward in shuffling lines, but the voice in the darkness broke in again:

"No, no, no, no, no!"

The orchestra stopped in a ragged, uncertain way, and the owner of the directing voice climbed upon the stage by way of the boxes. From this point of vantage he looked down to the leader of the orchestra.

"Give me that opening again—just roughly."

The orchestra leader, still standing, played three or four measures with his right hand on the piano. The director shook his head.

"No, we can't work it," he decided. "That brings it on the wrong foot. We'll have to do it the way we planned the first time—come in with the left foot on the third beat." He illustrated with his own feet, swinging his body in preparation. "One, two, start-left, right." We can get it now but leave out all up to 'Dum de DUM.' That is, for the chorus dance; but leave it in, of course, for the solo dance and the song."

While this discussion had been going on the groups of performers and musicians alike had listened in a peculiar apathy, but now the director of each group began making the corrections for his own department, the man on the stage dressing, drawing forward, and arranging his ranks like a drill-sergeant, the orchestra leader, in a more fraternal manner, going with his pencil from one music-rack to another, reannotating the score. The players of the different instruments began at once little furtive, individual rehearsals, no one of them apparently paying any attention to the others, yet, curiously, making no discords.

Again the director on the stage clapped his hands, the conductor lifted his baton over his desk, the men in the pit straightened in their seats, the baton fell, and the music burst forth in a wholesome, full-hearted sweep.

"One, two, *left*, RIGHT!" shouted the director on the stage, dancing himself at the end of the line and interpolating shouted instructions above the music.

"Steady! Steady! . . . Maurice! . . . Swing in. Swing in!"

At the conclusion the man on the stage called to the still unseen man in the darkness, "How 's that now?"

"That 's more like it," said a voice.

The rehearsal was not so much one of dances as of marchings and tableaux. Only occasionally did any of the principals come on, and then only to "walk through" bits of their parts. On one occasion a new scene was tried, and the voice in the darkness called out:

"Who's entrance is this?"

"That 's Miss Marshall's," answered the man on the stage. "She 's not here to-day. Poppy, just take that entrance for now, will you?"

From her place in the chorus Poppy Vaughn stepped out, but at Miss Marshall's name, tossed around so innocently, Bellsmith had felt a sudden, peculiar twinge, almost of jealousy. He heard Miss Marshall herself breathe sharply in the darkness beside him, and he leaned over to whisper:

"Does n't that make you feel rather uncanny, to hear them talk about you?"

"Yes, it does, in a way," answered Miss Marshall, "but it 's not as uncanny as to see some one else play your part. That 's like seeing yourself in moving pictures."

"How do you like it?" she added a moment later.

"Fine!" said Bellsmith. "I 'm having the time of my life."

"You said that the other night," commented the girl.

"Well, it was true both times."

Possibly it was only by accident, but the leader of the orchestra at the other end of the auditorium turned suddenly around at that moment and peered into the darkness, and they both fell into silence, like guilty children.

The rehearsal, however, was incessantly interrupted by long debates, as all rehearsals are, and in these they could talk more freely, for the men in the orchestra, as before, filled in the time with impromptu rehearsals of their own parts, simulated or pianissimo.

It was in one of these intervals that Bellsmith, lost in a day-dream, was suddenly conscious that Miss Marshall was speaking to him, highly amused.

"Do I always," she asked, "have to speak to you three times before you will answer? What were you thinking of?"

Bellsmith blushed self-consciously. "I was thinking out an amusing stunt."

"Stunt for what?"

"A bit of music I had in mind."

"What was it?"

"Well," answered Bellsmith, "I haven't decided whether to call it 'The Policeman's Sonata' or 'Concerto for Two Bass Viols in E.'"

The poise of Miss Marshall's head in the darkness expressed her mystification, and Bellsmith told the story of how he had pitched the policeman's voice in the lower hall during those long days of self-exile when his principal amusement had been listening to the passages of arms between the plain-clothes man and William, dialogues which he could hear but could never see.

He motioned toward the double-bass player in the orchestra at the foot of the auditorium.

"Listening to that chap down there," he explained, "it just occurred to me that it could really be done. But I don't know exactly what instrument *would* express William. The piccolo, I guess, or the kettledrum."

Miss Marshall was looking at him with that curious searching glance with which she had studied him on the first evening.

"Do you mean to say," she asked, "that you really *could* write a piece like that?"

"It would n't be much of a piece," replied Bellsmith. "It would be just an amusing stunt."

Miss Marshall shook her head. "No," she mused, "I am surer than ever that you will prove in the end to be really a dealer in hay, grain, and feed. Your many facets are too good to be true.

"Will you play to me some time?" she added quietly.

"Very gladly," said Bellsmith.¹

Again suddenly the director on the stage clapped his hands for attention and again was interrupted.

¹ Followers of recent symphony programs will have no difficulty in recognizing, in the above, the first rough conceptions of what ultimately was to become the well-known "Bull Fiddle Overture," the only fragment of that curious medley of good and bad music, "Eleanor," to survive its initial season. Purely as an orchestral composition this entertaining bit of sheer comedy in instrumental music has been included several times in Boston and Chicago programs and was given by invitation in April, 1922 at the Goshen Festival. With the limitations of a theater orchestra the form in which it was incorporated in "Eleanor" was naturally very different from the elaborate instrumentation with which it is now offered.

"Wait a minute. What time is it getting to be?" asked the voice in the darkness, and the question also brought Bellsmith up standing. He looked at his watch held up against the faint glow from the distant footlights.

"Twenty-five minutes past four!" he whispered. "I've got an appointment with the doctor at half-past. Can I drop you at the Massapauk or do you want to stay here?"

"I think I'll stay here," said Miss Marshall, and again, as he tiptoed out of the theater, it would have been difficult for Bellsmith to say just why he felt a peculiar little jealous twinge.

Nevertheless, as Keefe bore him smoothly away, twisting intricately through the crowded streets, he had to admit that he still felt an exultant mood like none he had felt since he could remember.

Only when he entered the door of the doctor's office did the shaming reality of his past week come back upon him, for the nurse in the passageway looked up from her telephone with a mischievous grin, and, as he entered the inner consulting-room, even the doctor himself could not hold back his impulse.

"Well, Nero!" he hailed with a grin, but Bellsmith viciously snapped off the end of a fresh cigar and sank back into a chair.

"Doctor," he retorted, "my famous message regarding my house applies to you also."

CHAPTER XVI

AS had been the case the previous week, Bellsmith was again the last visitor of the afternoon, and Dr. MacVickar took out his black brier pipe without further ceremony. He looked for a minute whimsically at his patient.

"Well," he suggested quietly, "it looks to me as if this case had been rather taken out of my hands."

"Don't you believe it," said Bellsmith. "I need a darkened room and a soothing draught more than ever before."

"What's the matter?" asked the doctor, grinning.

"What's the matter?" retorted Bellsmith. "Don't you read the papers?"

"I see that *you* do," answered the doctor. "Do you still read them automatically, without even sensing the words, and suffer from intolerable boredom?"

"Oh, doctor, let up," begged Bellsmith. "I came to bury Nero, not to praise him. I'm cured of that particular form of ennui all right, but I could have cured myself in the same fashion by kicking the mayor's high hat or running away with a circus rider."

"Could you?" asked the doctor quietly. "Why didn't you ever do it?"

Bellsmith blushed. The point had gone home.

"Well, anyway, it's a rotten cure," he replied, and the doctor laughed.

"You look at it in the wrong light. You don't seem to realize that you are a national hero. Every sentimental girl in the city is dreaming about you as a sort of dashing dragoon. Why don't you go over to the University Club and see how the men there are talking about you? You never did a thing in your life that set you so high in public esteem. Why, man alive! don't you realize that famous statesmen and prima donnas would envy the publicity that you are getting for nothing?"

"I am not a statesman," responded Bellsmith, "and, with your help, doctor, I never intend to be a prima donna. I don't like it, and that's all there is to it. I'd give my soul if it never had happened."

The doctor looked him humorously in the eye.

"Is that true?" he asked, quietly.

Bellsmith's eyes dropped. "I suppose it is n't—really," he confessed.

"You know very well that it is n't," replied the doctor. "You would n't undo that act for anything in the world. Now, would you—honestly?"

"No; I presume I would n't," confessed Bellsmith. "Just the same—"

The doctor dropped his bantering tone.

"What really did happen?" he asked.

Bellsmith told him, and he commented, "I understood that it was something like that. But why in the world didn't you come out and give the facts?"

"Would any one have believed them?" demanded Bellsmith. "Come, now. If I were an absolute stranger to you—all you knew of me was what you read in the

papers—would n't you yourself have put your tongue in your cheek and believed the story just the same?"

The doctor nodded slowly. "I probably should. So you wisely decided just to say nothing and let the whole thing blow over?"

Bellsmith grinned ruefully. "I wish I could honestly say it was 'wisely.' The truth was that I just got huffy—got my back up."

"I imagine," said the doctor, "that more great deeds come about that way than any of us would suppose."

He suddenly changed his tone, as he always did when he wished to keep the control of the conversation in his own hands.

"Now let's get down to business," he said. "How have you really been getting along? How about that killing inertia of yours?"

Bellsmith grinned again in a way that was decidedly healthy. It suited his face like a coat of tan.

"Well, for one thing, I've taken up music again. I find I have quite an interest in it."

A faint flicker of amusement lingered behind the doctor's eyes, but probably he decided that it would be wiser to check it and he replied simply:

"That's good.

"How about your little crotchety habits?" he added, a minute later. "Do you still have to open three doors and close two windows before you can read a book, or put on your right shoe before you put on your left?"

"Well," confessed Bellsmith, "I'm afraid that I'm not wholly cured in that line, but I haven't had time to think much about those things."

The doctor nodded. "That 's usually about the way of it. When the executioner's ax is actually over your head you begin to lose interest in signs and omens. Things are too blamed definite as they are."

Bellsmith abruptly sat upright in his chair.

"Doctor," he demanded, "you would n't tell me last week what was really the matter with me. Will you now?"

As he had done on the previous visit, the doctor thoughtfully picked up his fountain-pen, with the cap still on it, and began to move the dull round end slowly over the big, fresh blotter on his desk. As he himself would have recognized, there was probably some association of thought which suggested the movement.

"I told you," he corrected, slowly, "that I would n't tell you because you would n't take it seriously enough."

He paused, then added: "When I was in college one of the foot-ball men elected a course in ethics. At the end of the first day he came out in great amazement and exclaimed, 'Why, ethics is nothing but what you know anyway, just put in other words!'

"Now that is very much the case with most mental ailments. Technically, a man ought to know what is the matter with him far better than any physician,—the latter not being really a mind-reader, as you yourself suggested last week."

"That 's curious," said Bellsmith. "I heard some one else say that very thing only to-day."

But the doctor was either too absorbed in his point or the reference had been too casual for him to see behind it with his usual quickness.

"The trouble is," he continued, without looking up, "that not one man or woman in ten thousand has sufficient perception, or sufficient character, or sufficient ruthlessness toward themselves to recognize or admit their own mental processes, even when they are pointed out to them. So we have to be very careful how we point."

"Is this psychoanalysis?" asked Bellsmith.

The doctor continued to draw small circles with the blunt end of his pen and spoke very slowly.

"I should prefer," he said dryly, "not to have the particular circus for which I work confused with the gamblers and side-shows that hang around its outskirts. It's psychology, certainly, and it is analysis, but the craze for psychoanalysis merely means another form of the weakness itself—a desire to blunt a simple idea with a baffling name. If you wish to call it common sense, human nature, or intuitive, logical thought, any psychiatrist will meet you more than half-way, and you will find that you and the medical profession have an amazing amount in common."

Having delivered himself of this slightly venomous dart, the doctor laid down his pen and looked squarely at Bellsmith.

"Mr. Bellsmith," he began, "your trouble is simply that of any wealthy young man who is neither exceptionally vigorous nor exceptionally vicious. You have simply followed the line of the least resistance until you have reached the end of it. You have reached the irreducible minimum. You have got down to things so elemental that even you can't avoid them. Any

banker could tell you that as well as any physician.

"You are not," he continued, "like most young men in your position. I mean most of those who become fit subjects for my profession. With them, following the line of the least resistance means following the line of the greatest pleasure, gratifying every desire as soon as it occurs, throwing themselves into profligacy.

"Your case is the exact opposite. You have a natural sensitiveness which precludes anything of that kind. But what that sensitiveness has also done has been to cause you to draw away instinctively whenever anything offered the least rebuff, the least complication, the smallest unpleasant suggestion. The result has been that you have cut off every side of normal activity, one after another, until you have had nothing left but opening and shutting doors and holding your hand over cracks in the window. If I may coin a phrase, you are suffering from the peculiar mental poverty of the pious. And now even the trifles of your own household, which are all you have left, have begun to oppress you as much as genuine disasters would have done five years ago."

Bellsmith sighed ruefully. "Go on, doctor. I know what 's coming."

The doctor looked up in surprise. "What is coming?"

Bellsmith laughed. "You are about to say that what I need is some compelling interest in life."

"Well, there you are!" replied the doctor. "You knew it as well as I did. The fact that it is trite does n't make it any less true, does it?"

"No," said Bellsmith wearily; "neither does *that* fact make it any less trite."

The doctor was amazing in one thing, that he knew just when to stop.

"Well, drop that for a moment. Let's go back to cases. What have you been doing the past week—besides telling the public to go to hell?"

"You are not exact in your quotations," said Bellsmith. "Well, for one thing, I have subdued a mutiny."

He related the story of his domestic uprising, and the doctor chuckled throughout the whole narration. "Fine!" he repeated at intervals, "Fine!" but when Bellsmith had finished he sat in silence, his eyes fixed quizzically in the distance, his lips puffing meditatively at his pipe.

In Bellsmith, however, the old New England conscience still hung on. Quite without prompting, he felt forced to add guiltily:

"Then, for another thing, I went to a rehearsal this afternoon—with Miss Marshall."

The doctor turned slowly and looked at him, still puffing thoughtfully. Bellsmith could stand it no longer, and he burst out suddenly:

"Doctor, do you think I ought to get married?"

"What do you mean by that?" asked the doctor, guardedly. "Do you mean to ask whether or not you are a proper physiological subject for marriage?"

"As to that," replied Bellsmith, "I imagine that I'd do it, if I wanted to, whether I was or not. No, I mean

as a general proposition—temperamentally, socially, economically, whatever you want to call it.”

“I think it would be a very good thing for Miss Marshall,” answered the doctor, dryly.

“Does that answer the question?” asked Bellsmith, thoughtfully.

“As far as I’d care to answer it,” replied the doctor.

There was naturally a silence for a moment, and then the doctor added:

“But even that would n’t solve your problem forever, not even for as long as you’d think. I can’t see why a fussy little married man would be your ambition any more than a fussy little single one.”

Possibly the doctor thought that there was danger in going too far along those lines, for he suddenly burst out in a sort of good-natured impatience:

“Is n’t there anything on earth that you want to do, as a regular occupation?”

Bellsmith shook his head. “Nothing on earth.”

Although Bellsmith had not welcomed the diversion as much as had the doctor, yet for a moment they both slipped gaily enough over the surface of the deeper thing that they both had in mind.

“Have you ever thought seriously,” suggested the doctor, “of taking over your own business affairs?”

“I have,” answered Bellsmith, “but have you no regard at all for the harmless old Bellsmith estate? I shudder to think what would happen to that if left in my hands. Would n’t you? I may be lazy, doctor, but I also have that maddening shrewdness of the

solvent classes. I am shrewd enough to know that there are two things with which my brain will never be fitted to cope. One of them is the game of bridge as offered to me by willing hands at the University Club, and the other is the investment market. They are both black magic to me and they always will be. My partner can trump my ace ten times an evening for all I understand about it, and when a stock rises or falls three eighths of a point I can't get up the faintest thrill."

"You would if your whole fortune hung on those three eighths of a point," answered the doctor.

"Quite true," replied Bellsmith, "but is it your object to bring me to that unfortunate pass? Had n't I better die as I am, rich and silly?"

"There is something in that," admitted the doctor. "Still, there are other outlets for one's energy."

Bellsmith suddenly held up his hand.

"Doctor," he warned, "if you are going to suggest philanthropic work, please stop right now."

"As a matter of fact, I was n't," retorted the doctor, "but since *you* have, what is the matter with it?"

"Chiefly," answered Bellsmith, "the fact that every well-meaning dolt in Leicester has been suggesting that since my birth. Business and philanthropy! For years those two have been hammered into me as my only salvation. But, doctor, what a world, if the only things in it that can save a man from insanity are making money and giving it away again! I think my trick with the crack in the window is about as sensible as that, when you come to think of it. No, the time *may* come when I can sit through a monthly meeting of the average phil-

anthropic committee with genuine ecstasy, but that time is not yet. I am still too weak a vessel."

The doctor's lips twitched humorously around the stem of his pipe. He continued to smoke thoughtfully with his eyes fixed absently on Bellsmith's feet. Bellsmith, becoming aware of the scrutiny, moved his feet nervously, and the doctor diverted his eyes to a point on the carpet.

"Mr. Bellsmith," he began, at last, slowly, "you are quite right about one thing. It is too much to face a man coldly with a certain thing—charity, business, or anything else—and order him deliberately to become interested in it. The human mind does not work that way. You might as well face a man with a certain heavy food and order him to like it—not merely to eat it but to like it."

"Exactly," said Bellsmith triumphantly. "Doctor, you are getting back to your old form. I was anxious about you for a moment."

The doctor acknowledged the sally only by a tightening of the little lines at the ends of his eyes, but Bellsmith pursued. "How do other people get interested in things? Most of them seem to be highly thrilled about something or other."

"That," answered the doctor, repaying him in his own coin, "is about as foolish a question as I ever heard, especially from you. Other people get interested in things by getting involved so deeply that they can't get out. They get in little by little. Necessity draws them in and then ties knots around them. Their money, their honor, their ambitions or their affections get so

deeply involved in something that they can't let go, if they want to. They have *got* to be interested, because they have so much at stake. There are few active people in this world who do not find themselves, every day of their lives, in some corner so tight that the only way that they can get out is by staying in. Do you think I sit here all day wholly because I love it?"

He saw a chance to push in a peg where it would be remembered, and he added, "Do you think that Miss Marshall remains on the stage, as sick as she is, simply from will power—or ambition?"

Bellsmith looked away but was not diverted from the issue.

"All that is quite true," he protested, "but can you call that 'interest'? Is n't that merely the instinct of self-preservation?"

"There are few times in the average life," replied the doctor, "when there is a great deal of difference. If a grizzly bear were chasing you along the top of a cliff, would n't you be 'interested' in the outcome of the race? Can you picture boredom under such circumstances?"

"No," laughed Bellsmith. "Then your advice is to go around throwing myself in front of wild animals, or locomotives, simply to escape being bored?"

"Is n't that just about what most young men in your circumstances do?" answered the doctor. "Why else do they own racing-cars and aëroplanes and hunt big game and usually get smashed up in the end?"

"Because they like those things in the first place," retorted Bellsmith, "and I don't."

The doctor shook his head sadly. "Mr. Bellsmith, you are the most hopeless patient I ever had. You don't offer one single corner to catch hold of, and the worst feature of the case is that you know you don't and take pride in the fact."

Bellsmith, enjoying it all, folded his arms in mock helplessness.

"Well, doctor, what am I going to do about it?"

For answer the doctor looked at him quizzically.

"I 'm damned if I know," he confessed.

Bellsmith, however, was willing to make as many concessions as he was.

"Doctor," he said earnestly, "please don't misjudge my attitude. Don't think that I am lying back supinely and blocking your efforts, but you yourself have stated the futility of it all. I have been over and over the same ground so many times before. What advantage am I going to gain by going out and making myself actively miserable over things that I don't enjoy, which give me no sense of reality, which are merely playing at being busy, when I am at least only passively miserable as I am?"

"You would gain nothing whatsoever," admitted the doctor, "in the way that you put it, but you must admit that there may be something in the world which can interest even you."

He put down his pipe and looked up sharply.

"Why don't you go into the theatrical business?"

He had scored, and he knew he had, although Bellsmith weakly tried to evade.

"What are you talking about?" he demanded.

The doctor brushed him aside impatiently.

"Now look here," he demanded. "There is something that you are interested in and you know it."

The doctor laughed a little self-consciously and added, "I shall probably be expelled from the medical profession for this, but let's get down to tacks. In another week that show—what's its name?—'Eleanor' will be gone and the liveliest chapter your life has had in years will be over. What may happen between then and now I won't undertake to say. Assume that it does or it doesn't. In either case you will settle down just about where you were before. You will merely come to me again in a year, or five years. Why do it? When that show goes out of Leicester, why don't you go with it?"

"Run away with the circus?" suggested Bellsmith nervously, but he knew and the doctor knew that he was already enraptured with the idea.

"But how could I?" he added. "I'm not an actor. I could n't even count tickets."

Again the doctor brushed him aside. "Now you're just quibbling."

He paused to let the idea sink in. Then he asked simply:

"Why don't you take a financial interest in the show? For that matter, why don't you buy it outright?"

"Wha-at?" demanded Bellsmith.

"Why don't you buy the whole show?" repeated the doctor, quietly. "What under heaven is there to prevent you? You are not an actor, as you say. You are

not a manager, but you have money. If you will pardon my saying so, it is the one thing that you *have* got that is of interest to other men. It is your natural wedge for entering active life. You need n't worry. They 'll overlook your lack of experience if your bank-account is all right. What 's to prevent you from walking out of this office now, going down to the Lyceum Theater, and buying that whole blooming show? I don't think that *I* should be bored with life if I could do things like that."

Bellsmith looked at him with dawning delight, but of course doubt at once began to cloud it.

"But doctor—," he began.

"No," insisted the doctor, "I really mean it. It 's no more costly than a yacht and no more foolish than lots of things you might think of. Look here. You would n't hesitate a minute to endow a picture-gallery or finance an attempt to revive classic drama. Why not endow an established, self-respecting, professional show? Go on. Why not?"

Bellsmith watched him thoroughly aghast. Then slowly the gleams of delighted inspiration came back into his eyes.

"I wonder," he began, "I wonder how much a show would cost."

"Why ask me?" laughed the doctor. *I* don't want to buy one. I did that sort of thing in college."

"Doctor," said Bellsmith slowly, "I begin to see why you understand my case so thoroughly. At heart you are madder than I am."

He rose slowly to his feet. "It would miss the whole magnificence of the thing," he mused, "if I did n't do it at once. I think I 'll go down there now."

"I would," laughed the doctor. "If you don't go now you never will."

"Oh, I 'm going!" answered Bellsmith. "Don't worry. I hope they 'll take a check for it, or be willing to charge it."

He paused, then concluded: "But just the same, doctor, kindly look up from that blotter of yours. I don't want you to miss this—as a professional study. You now have before you a chance to study the facial expressions, gestures, and other reactions of a nervous invalid who has made up his mind to purchase a musical comedy."

CHAPTER XVII

AT a certain moment just after six o'clock, when electric lights still compete with the fag-end of daylight, when the working crowds have gone home and the pleasure crowds have not yet returned, when provident souls have perfected their plans for the evening and improvident souls have not yet been forced to make up their minds, when, in short, early dinners are not completed and late dinners are not begun, there comes a curious, vacant "patch" in the routine of a provincial theater, a little odd moment of emptiness hardly equalled in all the rest of the day. It was in this vacant moment, before the slow stir which begins again in the early evening, that Arnold Bellsmith, riding wildly on the momentum of his boast to the doctor, burst into the lobby of the Leicester Lyceum.

The sight which met him was rather chilling for such a fantastic flight. The lobby was empty except for a chance young man in a very tight, high-waisted overcoat who was walking out, holding his tickets in one hand and counting his change in the other. With his eyes cast down, he and Bellsmith almost collided, made mutual apologies, then each stepped aside, and Bellsmith was left alone in what was apparently an empty, echoing vault.

A janitor came through the swinging doors from the

theater proper, clamped the doors open, and, whistling gaily, began to brush up the dust, cigarette ends, obsolete seat checks and other litter left by the steady flow of the afternoon's box-office business. Through the doors he had opened Bellsmith could see the dim rows of seats in the main part of the house, now lighted only by the red lamps at the exits, and, beyond them, a huge bleak wall of curtain marked in big letters, "Asbestos." The janitor disappeared for a moment, came back, bearing in each hand one of the tall tin receivers, like ballot-boxes, in which the doorkeepers put the torn-off tickets, and dropped them with a slam at each side of the door.

Bellsmith approached him timidly.

"I beg your pardon—," he began, but the janitor, like most persons who occupy insignificant positions in public life had a manner in which good-natured indifference and studied insolence were nicely balanced. He continued to sweep as if Bellsmith had not been in existence and Bellsmith repeated, with even more hesitation:

"I beg your pardon. Can you tell me where I can find the manager?"

The janitor stopped sweeping, leaned on his long-handled brush as a farmer might lean on his hoe and surveyed him from head to foot. Before he could answer, a sharp and officious voice came from behind them both:

"What do you want? Who are you looking for?"

As if that relieved him from any further responsibility, the janitor began sweeping again, and Bell-

smith looked vaguely for the owner of the voice. It was a moment before he placed it as coming from a thick-set young man with hair parted mathematically in the middle, whose head and shoulders had suddenly appeared behind the window of the box-office. An opened book which he had been reading was placed face downward in front of him.

Bellsmith walked over to the window. "I am looking for the manager," he said.

"What manager?" snapped the thick-set young man.

"Why—why—the business manager," began Bellsmith indefinitely, but the ticket-seller broke in:

"The manager of the theater or the manager of the show?"

"The—I guess it is the manager of the show," replied Bellsmith, but the thick-set young man did not stir.

"What do you want to see him about? Something about seats?"

"No, it is nothing about seats," replied Bellsmith.

"I—I want to see him on business."

He could hardly know that nine out of every ten theatrical parasites used exactly that phrase, but, on the other hand, something about his dress and manner, something in the courteous timidity of his attitude, was puzzling to the man behind the window. He hesitated a moment, but finally turned and spoke into a telephone at his elbow.

"Hello! Mr. Israels there? Some one to see him."

Without another word, he picked up his book and continued reading. With a queer, gully feeling, like that

of a country boy in search of his first job, Bellsmith turned to the empty lobby where now even the janitor had finished his sketchy and superficial sweeping. He gazed around with assumed casualness. On the walls were huge and dusty framed portraits of Lillian Russell, Sir Henry Irving, and William Gillette, all signed in compliment to the owner of the house but all taken, obviously, in a day when photography was not the art which it later became. Gillette, in particular, wore the big "Ascot" tie and the odd, high-cut waistcoat of the nineties.

On the floor, under these classic notables, stood a big wicker easel bearing a large display frame filled with photographed groups from "Eleanor"—a little group of three principals in front of a trellised inn, a single large picture of Maida Maine, a double octet of chorus men standing in line and chorus girls kneeling before them, a closely packed group of girls, all displaying set smiles through heavily painted lips which stood out with unnatural harshness in the cold black and white of the photographs. In all the pictures the one girl who was a little taller than all the others was always smiling a little harder than the rest, as if her extra size demanded the extra effort. A hundred show frames, advertising a hundred musical shows, in the lobbies of a hundred theaters, could have been substituted for this one, and the casual observer would hardly have known that a change had been made. Even Bellsmith could establish no particular connection of reality between those pictures and his present errand.

His reverie was broken by the sharp voice of the ticket-seller behind him.

"There you are! There's your man!"

Bellsmith pulled himself up with a start and saw that a round, swarthy young man had come in silently through a door at the end of the lobby and was standing waiting. He was dressed in black as complete as deep mourning, even to the black derby hat which accentuated his heavy eyebrows and full, olive skin. While waiting he made continuously a clucking sound through his closed lips as if he were accustomed to having a toothpick in his teeth, although no toothpick was actually there.

In his diffidence Bellsmith had not made a move, and the new-comer looked pleasantly enough toward the box-office.

"Some one to see me, Oliver?"

The young man in the box-office made a silent gesture toward Bellsmith, and the manager's attitude stiffened, as it probably did toward all strangers.

"Do you want to see me?"

"Are you the manager of this—this musical comedy?"

The gross ineptness of Bellsmith's words put the manager still further on his guard. He nodded cautiously, as if reluctant to admit even that much, and Bellsmith found himself unable to continue. He hesitated so long that the manager fully decided that, after all, he was merely one more of the well-dressed hangers-on who infest managers' offices. He broke in gruffly:

"Come, come, mister. What do you want?"

It was that one word "mister" which caught hold of something in Bellsmith deeper than his own cultivated weakness. As Margaret had learned, it was a very foolish way to speak to Bellsmith.

"I wanted to know," he said abruptly, "whether you wanted to sell this show?"

"What?" gasped the man in front of him. "What in the devil do you mean?"

"I wanted to know," repeated Bellsmith quietly, "whether you wanted to sell this show."

Behind him Bellsmith was aware that the young man in the box-office had closed his book and was listening intently. The swarthy young man before him was so thunderstruck that he even forgot to bluster. He looked at Bellsmith, wholly at sea.

"I don't just get you," he said, in a more human voice. "This show? 'Eleanor'? Is 'Eleanor' for sale?"

Bellsmith nodded. "Yes. Is it?"

The manager put his hand to his chin and continued to stare, his brow puckering.

"Say, what is this, anyway?" he began, querulously. "Are you trying to string me or something?"

Bellsmith merely smiled. "No," he replied, "I am asking as a simple business proposition. I want to know whether one could buy this show."

"Who *wants* to buy it?"

"I do."

The manager looked him slowly over from head to foot. In that long scrutiny details of Bellsmith's ap-

pearance which had passed unobserved in his first careless glance were made plain to him and his attitude changed.

"Say, wait a minute," he said, pleasantly enough. He turned to the box-office. "Hey! Oliver! come out here a minute, will you?"

The door of the box-office opened and the thick-set young man came out, shedding his official character as he came. At the same moment the janitor turned on the full lights of the lobby. It gave a much pleasanter, more cheerful atmosphere to the whole proceeding, and Bellsmith's spirits went up accordingly. The thick-set young man in particular appeared a much more friendly figure outside his cage. Seen in his private life, as it were, he was not really belligerent or supercilious at all—not even thick-set.

"Say, Oliver," began the manager, "this—this gentleman's got me guessing. He says he wants to buy the show. What does he mean?"

The ticket-seller turned, politely, but equally puzzled, to Bellsmith.

"Your face is familiar," he said, "but I am afraid that I don't know your name."

"My name is Bellsmith—Arnold Bellsmith."

"Oh!" said the ticket-seller, raising his eyebrows. A smile flickered over his lips, to which even Bellsmith responded. He looked at Bellsmith with humorous eyes, and then at the manager.

"I don't know what the joke is," he said, "but if Mr. Bellsmith wants to buy the show, I guess he can do it."

The respect in his tone conveyed enough to the manager to make him still more polite but not enough to make him confidential.

He suddenly jerked his head. "Say, Oliver, come here a minute, will you? Will you excuse us, Mr.—Grossmith?"

The two disappeared together through the door by which the manager had entered, while Bellsmith waited, amused. It was not hard to guess what they were talking about. In a moment they reappeared with the air of a family party.

"Mr. Bellsmith," said the ticket-seller, "shake hands with Mr. Israels."

"Pleased to meet you," said the manager, solemnly offering his hand as if they had never spoken a word before. Bellsmith bowed slightly with the nice formality which the occasion seemed to demand. He was vaguely aware that this sudden interview, with its air of intimate business, gave him a little glow, a sense of importance which was really fascinating.

"I was going to say, Mr. Grossmith—," began the manager.

"Mr. Bellsmith," corrected the ticket-seller.

"My mistake," said the manager. "I was going to say, Mr. Bellsmith, that you've still got me guessing, but I am willing to listen to anything once. Suppose we go into the office. Will you come with us, Oliver?"

"Sorry, thank you," replied the ticket-seller. "I've got to get back into jail."

He turned with a nod to them both and disappeared behind the grilled window, while Israels opened a swing-

ing door into a large, dim space which could apparently be made part of the lobby when extra crowds were to be handled. At the end of this twilight zone an oblong of brilliant light cut the darkness from an open doorway, and to this Israels led the way.

In a theater, space is as valuable a consideration as it is in a sleeping-car, and the private office was nothing but a cubbyhole tucked under a flight of stairs. A desk occupied almost the whole of it, leaving scarcely two feet of space where a man could have stood erect. Red burlap covered the walls, while scattered over the burlap was an indiscriminate mass of photographs of actors and actresses not important enough to be framed in the lobby but still important enough to be tacked up under the stairs. The place needed only a fish-net and a pair of hockey skates to make it look like a room in a boarding-school.

Israels took the swivel chair at the desk, threw one leg across it, and shoved his hat back on his head. "Have a cigar, Mr. Grossmith?"

The cigar was one which even Bellsmith could not despise. Lighting it, he sat down and, by some strange impulse, shoved his own hat back on his head, as his companion had done. Instantly he felt foolish for having done it, began to put it on straight again, then felt that that would be more foolish still and left it as it was, acutely aware of it for minutes after.

Even men accustomed to public life, like Israels, grow strangely human when placed in an unfamiliar position. The young manager picked up a tiny fragment of paper and began rolling it absently in his fingers, while his

face assumed an expression of grave deliberation. By some odd flash of intuition Bellsmith felt that Israels had read somewhere a book on office management, or command of men, or something of that kind, and was unconsciously putting himself into the proper pose.

"Now, Mr. Grossmith—Bellsmith is it?" began Israels, "I don't doubt but what you 're serious enough in this business. Oliver, out there, tells me that you could buy all the shows on Broadway if you wanted to, but, frankly, what is the big idea? Have you ever had anything to do with the show business?"

Bellsmith shook his head, now amazingly at ease. The doctor was right. It really was astounding what could happen to one in ten minutes if one gave it half a chance. Here he was talking as if one bought and sold comedies as casually as one bought a horse.

"No," he replied with a little laugh which showed his enjoyment of the other man's perplexity, "I have never been nearer the—the show business than a seat in the orchestra."

The answer naturally brought no more enlightenment to Israels.

"But just what do you want to do? What is your object? Do you want to put some money into it—buy an interest, so to speak?"

"No," said Bellsmith, "I want to take over the whole thing, lock, stock, and barrel."

Israels whistled. It was evident that his visitor had not the slightest idea of what he was undertaking.

"You don't mean to manage it yourself, do you?"

"Oh, no," replied Bellsmith. "I frankly don't know anything about the business. I just want control."

That word had a ring about it which was not new to the show business, and Israels began to see light. "You know some one in the company, don't you?"

Bellsmith hesitated. Little as he had contemplated being a stage-door Johnny, still less had he contemplated figuring as a theatrical "angel."

"Yes," he confessed, "I know several of the company—but just casually."

Israels was too old a hand to press that point. After all, an angel was an angel. "See much of the show in New York?"

Bellsmith shook his head. "I never heard of it until last week. I've only seen it once."

Israels looked at him with a grin of amazement. "You've only seen it once?" he repeated. Here *was* a fast worker.

He sat for some minutes thinking it over. "Well, just how much money are you prepared to put into it?"

"How much do you want?"

Israels did not reply at once, and when he did it was with an air of notable caution.

"You understand," he began, "that I don't own this show myself. I'm merely the manager on the road. It belongs to Harcourt & Gay. To give you any answer I'd have to get in touch with them, and even then I don't know that they'd be prepared to talk about it. You'd probably have to go to New York and see them."

"That would n't do," replied Bellsmith firmly. "I want to buy it to-night or never."

"Holy Moses!" exclaimed Israels. "You *are* in a hurry, are n't you?"

A sudden new suspicion came to him. "Look here. You 're not acting somebody else, are you?"

"Not a soul."

Israels was still unconvinced. "We don't want to wake up and find we 've sold our booking to the A. & E. crowd or something of that kind. The Holberts would wring our necks. Why won't to-morrow do?"

Bellsmith suddenly let himself go. "If you really want to sell," he remarked frankly, "I would advise you to do so now. I'd lose my nerve entirely by to-morrow."

The manager grinned. "There 's something in that. "Just the same—," he began again.

"Could n't you call them up, to-night—now?" suggested Bellsmith.

"Why—why, yes," replied Israels. "I think so."

He reached uncertainly for the telephone on the desk, then drew his hand back. "Just what security do you mean to put up for this deal?"

"Cash," replied Bellsmith, "that is, of course, my personal check. I will hand it over as soon as we are able to agree on a price."

Still Israels hesitated. "Have you any idea how much a show costs? A great big successful musical offering like this one?"

Bellsmith smiled. "Apparently I am going to find out in a minute. Of course," he added, "I don't mean that I am going to pay you a million dollars."

His answer seemed to impress Israels more than any-

thing he had yet said. Again to the manager's mind came the suspicion that something lay under this deal which was not apparent on the surface but, like Bellsmith, he was committed to it now and with an impulsive movement, curiously similar to that with which Bellsmith had launched himself from the doctor's office, he reached for the telephone. As he spoke into it his voice became once more that metallic snarl which apparently he assumed as a professional manner.

"Hello. Long-distance. . . . Long-distance? This is the Lyceum Theater. I want New York, Lenox four, eight, nine, six. FOUR, EIGHT, NINE, SIX, and I want to talk with Mr. Gay. G-A-Y, Gay. Same as 'merry.' No, no, no, Mr. Gay. And say, sister, if he is n't there, tell them— O hell!"

Viciously he hung up the receiver and, with a grin, turned to Bellsmith.

"Are n't they the same the world over? Bone-head! I was going to tell her that if he was n't there, to have them find out where he was, but all she could say was, 'I 'll call you; I 'll call you.' " He puckered up his face and threw his voice into a simpering imitation of the telephone operator's. "I 'll call you!"

"Anyway," he concluded, "we 'll take a chance that he 's there. That 's his apartment. He sometimes stops in there on his way somewhere else."

Bellsmith made a motion to rise.

"Perhaps you had rather do your talking alone," he suggested.

"Well, perhaps it would be best," agreed Israels, "but wait and see if we get him, first."

Bellsmith sat back, but, not strangely, the interval left them nothing to talk about. The ears of both were strained for the ring of the bell. Even Israels seemed to be excited by the curious drama of the moment, but Bellsmith felt that he ought to say something.

"Have you been in this business long, Mr. Israels?"

Israels came back with a start. "Who? Me? Been in it twenty-two years."

Bellsmith's eyebrows showed his surprise, for the man did not look much more than thirty, and Israels explained:

"Sold candy when I was eleven. Was an usher when I was fourteen. Was out with a show of my own before I was twenty-one."

Bellsmith smiled. "I see that I am going into the business late in life."

"You'll learn fast enough," replied Israels, "but you've got to grow up in this business to understand it. Before—"

A sudden shrill ring of the telephone bell interrupted him, but it was only Bone-head calling to say "On your call to New York, Mr. Gay is not in and is not expected."

Israels slashed up the receiver and looked at his watch. "Quarter of seven," he mused.

He drummed thoughtfully on the desk. "I tell you what I'll do," he suggested. "Mr. Gay is likely to be at the Harcourt Theater any time after half-past seven. Suppose I leave a call there? Will you come back at that time?"

"Are you going to wait?" asked Bellsmith.

"Oh, I've got to wait. I don't want to miss him."

"Then I'll wait, too."

"Good enough," said the manager, and as the two men leaned back and faced each other across the desk a slow smile broke over the face of each.

"Say, look here," broke out Israels, after a minute.

"Have you had anything to eat? Let's go out and get a sandwich."

As they passed the box-office he leaned fraternally toward the grilled window.

"Oliver Mr. Bellsmith and I are going out for a sandwich. If that New York call comes, hold it. I'll be back in three minutes."

Outside the theater Bellsmith sent Keefe home rejoicing for the night and with Israels turned into the little restaurant next door. It was with a strange feeling that he realized suddenly that it was the same one that he had seen from the alley.

Fortified, not by *pâté à la reine*, as it proved, but by egg sandwiches and coffee from cups nearly half an inch thick, they returned to the little office and resumed their long vigil.

At twenty minutes to eight the telephone shrilled out again, and Israel grabbed the receiver, now as excited as Bellsmith.

"Hello!" he shouted. "That you, Mr. Gay? This is Israels speaking. Israels—with the 'Eleanor' company. I'm speaking from Leicester. Say, Mr. Gay, just wait a minute, will you?"

He turned suggestively toward Bellsmith, but Bellsmith was already on his feet. "I'll wait for you in the lobby."

Inwardly trembling but outwardly amazingly calm, Bellsmith passed through the twilight zone outside the office. As his hand fell on the lobby door he heard the first words of the conversation behind him:

"Say, Mr. Gay, I've got a funny proposition put up to me."

CHAPTER XVIII

THE swinging door closed behind him, and Bellsmith, blinking at the sudden light of the main lobby, found himself faced with a strangely enlivened scene, for the hour of quiet was long since over and the brisk movement of the evening had begun. A line of half a dozen people was forming in front of the box-office window. Others were coming in from the street, shuffling and laughing and taking their tickets from envelopes. The usual unattached individuals, mostly women, waiting for "friends with the tickets," were lined up along the wall searching anxiously each face as it entered the door. The door-man was in his position beside the tall boxes while, on the other side of the lobby, stood a stolid fireman in uniform.

With an attitude unconsciously but ludicrously professional, Bellsmith found himself settling back to watch the entering crowd, strangely feeling himself already an official part of the scene.

The door behind him opened and he turned expectantly, but it was only the electrician with a coil of lighting wire over his arm.

"Excuse me a minute," he said and, as Bellsmith moved aside, he reached up and turned a bulb over his head, found it dead, and replaced it with another.

The line in front of the box-office melted away for a

moment and an anxious-looking young woman with a heightened complexion under a heavy veil came bustling in, stopped in front of the window, and was handed a telegram. It was not hard for Bellsmith to recognize her as one of the company. Which one? he wondered.

The young woman opened her yellow envelope, looked at it casually, and then bustled toward the door in front of which he was standing. For a fraction of a second he caught her eye as she passed through the door, and something seemed to telegraph between them a sort of honest community of interest. Bellsmith knew that, standing there, she had taken him for some one connected with the "house." The idea was rather thrilling.

A second time the swinging door behind him opened, and this time, as Bellsmith turned, he found Israels waiting him with a hardly concealed air of excitement on his face.

"Well, Mr. Bellsmith," he hailed, "I guess that we 're ready to talk business."

"Good enough!" replied Bellsmith.

He turned to follow the other man into the darkened and unused part of the lobby, but, despite himself, there had been a frightened catch in his voice. Despite the strange ease with which everything had progressed up to that moment, he had still more than half felt that something would come up to stop the grotesque negotiations before they really reached a serious point. But now the word had been spoken. The verdict had been given. "*Jacta est alea!*" Yes, the *alea* was *jacta'd*, all right, but what made him keep suddenly thinking of his Latin, after all these years? Inconsequentially he re-

membered what Dr. MacVickar had said about the vividness of his dreams—all of scenes and persons recalled from far in the past.

Israels took his former seat in the little office. As before he threw one leg over the desk and shoved back his hat.

“Well, Mr. Bellsmith,” he began, rubbing his hands, “at first, Mr. Gay was as much bowled off his pins as I was. It took me an age to get it over to him that you were serious, but when I told him who you were and that you knew some of the people here in the show, the idea sort of appealed to his sporting blood, the way it did to mine. Normally he would n’t listen to selling out any of his interests, but, to tell the truth, between you and I, Mr. Gay has a weakness for one thing. He is all for New York attractions. He wants to see a show right there under his nose, and no matter how good the show is doing, like this one, he loses interest in it when it goes out on the road. He’s already got more in town than he can handle, and so, when he found that you really meant it, he said he might sell—for a price.”

He waited expectantly and Bellsmith cleared his throat.

“Er—er, what is the price?”

Israels stiffened himself into the attitude which such a negotiation demanded.

“Harcourt & Gay will sell you the show to-night for forty-five thousand dollars—in cash.”

Bellsmith’s face fell. Just what the price would be he had never really considered. Whatever it might be, he had known that he could meet it, but forty-five thou-

sand dollars, said as abruptly as that, sounded ominously and frighteningly big, even to him. Israels observed instantly the look of alarm in his face, and his own face hardened a bit cynically.

"Forty-five thousand," repeated Bellsmith absently, as if he were trying to make a mental inventory. "Just what would that include?"

"Everything. Copyright, exhibition rights, costumes, scenery, transfer of the company, booking; in fact full rights subject to previous contracts."

"Previous contracts?" asked Bellsmith. "What are those?"

"The usual ones," replied Israels, glibly, "three per cent. of the gross to the author, three to the composer, fifty dollars a week for the privilege of certain interpolated songs. Then of course the contracts with the principals. Most of those last during the termination of the present tour unless cancelled by mutual consent of both parties, breach of contract, or inability to appear."

Bellsmith smiled wanly. "As a matter of fact," he confessed, "I suppose it's perfectly useless for me to ask any of these details. I wouldn't understand them even if you told me."

"Oh, we're not cheating you, Mr. Bellsmith," affirmed the manager stoutly.

"No," agreed Bellsmith, slowly, "I think you can safely say that. When could I—as it were—take possession? Move in?"

"Any time you like," grinned Israels. "At the conclusion of this performance?"

Bellsmith thought a moment, his eyes on the floor and Israels suddenly changed to milder tactics.

"It may sound large to you," he said, encouragingly, "but forty-five thousand dollars is nothing for a show of this kind. We're perfectly willing to keep it at that price."

"Oh, that's not the point," replied Bellsmith, still slowly, his eyes still on the floor. "It was n't that that was worrying me. When you come right down to *that*, it would be just as foolish for me to buy this show for *one* dollar as it would for forty-five thousand."

He looked up quietly. "All right. I'll take it."

"For forty-five thousand dollars?" asked Israels, nervously.

"For forty-five thousand dollars," affirmed Bellsmith.

There was an instant of tense silence, then Israel's hand shot across the desk.

"Mr. Bellsmith, you're on," he exclaimed. "The show is yours."

Bellsmith smiled uncertainly. "Now comes the awful problem of what I'm going to do with the ghastly thing."

"Don't let that worry you," encouraged Israels. "The organization will run along just like silk. Now, er—you spoke about completing this thing this evening. That price is for to-night only."

"Why, certainly," replied Bellsmith, but with a little faintness in his voice.

He looked at his watch to give himself strength. "I can give you my check now. To-morrow I suppose I ought to get in a lawyer."

"Get ten if you want to," exclaimed Israels heartily. "Harcourt & Gay will probably send one up from New York."

"In the meantime," continued Bellsmith, "can you continue as my manager?"

"I don't see any reason why not," replied Israels. "If you are a man who buys forty-five-thousand-dollar shows out of his vest pocket I think that I want to work for you. Don't worry yourself a bit, Mr. Bellsmith. I'll run it on just as I have."

With a hand which still trembled Bellsmith drew a blank check from his pocket-book, and by way of exchange of courtesies it was now Israels who got up and walked out into the lobby.

The crowd was now well inside the house. The orchestra was already playing its overture, and the lobby was becoming empty again. Two or three late comers still came and went before the grilled window, but Israels pushed boisterously into the tiny box-office and slapped Oliver on the shoulder.

"Well, boy!" he exclaimed. "He's done it! Forty-five thousand in cash. He's in there now writing his check."

Oliver looked, startled, over his shoulder, still counting change.

"Go on! Not really?" he exclaimed incredulously.

"Fact!" gloated Israels. "The poor man's crazy, I suppose, but I take off my hat to him just the same. He's a real sport! Well, see you later. I've got to get back. I don't dare leave him alone. I'm afraid he'll wake up."

Still grinning exultantly, Israels crowded out of the tiny box-office into the lobby, and, from his conversation as well as from the whole incredible transaction, it will not be hard to guess that Arnold Bellsmith had just purchased one of the theater's famous white elephants, one of the season's classic "lemons," a show which had indeed cost a fortune to produce but which had been losing five or six thousand dollars a week since its first night and which the incredulous Gay, standing in evening clothes in his New York office, stunned by this unbelievable stroke of fortune, had instructed Israels to unload on the unknown "angel" for anything he could get over twenty thousand dollars—and not even to hold out too hard for twenty.

As for Israels himself, it had been easy for him to promise that he would continue as Bellsmith's manager. He had seen stage-struck young millionaires before, and he knew that in two months at the most he would be back in Harcourt & Gay's employ with a bonus of not less than five thousand dollars and all the prestige of having saved them the cost of a failure.

When Israels returned to the little office under the stairs Bellsmith was waving his damp check helplessly in the air, the private office apparently not boasting a blotter. He blew on it two or three times and handed it over.

"I don't know just how much money I've got in the bank but I think that you'll find this is good."

"Well, if it is n't," replied Israels, "we've still got the show."

Bellsmith rose and the two men passed together

through the lobby to the door of the auditorium. As they reached the tin boxes by the door the house lights went dark, the orchestra suddenly switched from its listless overture into a lively chorus, and, with a slow *swish*, the curtain went rolling up.

Standing on tiptoe, Israels looked past the door-man at the widening stretch of warm, yellow light under the rising curtain. He turned to Bellsmith, not, for his own part, without a certain elation.

“Well, Mr. Bellsmith, there goes your show!”

CHAPTER XIX

NOW, with the rise of the curtain on "Eleanor," which was Arnold Bellsmith's first great contact with life, there comes a peculiar temptation, one of those crises in the life of a story which must be met and fought down.

The temptation is to draw a black line across the page at this point and write in the impressive words:

END OF BOOK ONE

Then the rest of the story could be called "Renunciation" or "Harvest" or, as Bellsmith himself would say, "something jolly and stern."

For this episode undoubtedly did mark a turning-point in the life of Arnold Bellsmith. Having purchased a musical comedy on the road, it would require no such shrewd observer as Israels, for example, to understand perfectly that Arnold Bellsmith's playtime was over.

On the other hand, if the rest of the story is to be called "Renunciation," the first part must be called "Youth," and, say what you like, Bellsmith was unmistakably thirty-five.

Also there is this difficulty: To merit division into "books" and "episodes" and "phases"—the little chevrons of earnest ideas—a story must really consider

itself to be somber and searching. But Bellsmith was a trifler, and all actors are shadowy stuff at best. No vision which loves flippancy for its own sake can give any possible interpretation of "life."

So, "*Pereat!* Thumbs down," cries Bellsmith himself, remembering his Latin with greater and greater frequency as the toils of necessity tighten around him and awaken his slumbering soul. After all, the man himself is frankly Victorian, so, taking the cue from him, one puts aside the temptation to nose into modern letters and merely hurries on into—

CHAPTER XX

WITH a common impulse both men turned and walked into the darkened house, while, at the same moment, a ripple of laughter swept over the audience at some gesture that had been made on the stage. It seemed to Bellsmith like a good omen. His pulse began to beat rapidly, as if he himself had been responsible for the laugh, but, making an attempt to adapt his attitude to the nonchalance affected by Israels, he leaned his elbow on the high rail behind the last row of seats and fixed his attention on the stage. He tried, almost physically, to make himself realize that that show now in performance was actually *his*, but the effort was too great. It had all come about so suddenly that he could establish no mental connection with that scene on the other side of the footlights.

It was curious, though, how differently the show looked from the previous evening—like an old friend seen in a new aspect—like a distant, familiar view moved suddenly nearer. His attention wandered for a moment from the stage to the boxes, searching for friends, but the boxes were empty. With a sudden hurt feeling he also realized that the auditorium itself was only about three quarters filled. There was an ominous gap between the crowd at the front of the house and the last few rows, where he was standing. For a moment a

spark of resentment rose up in his mind against stodgy old Leicester. Already, unconsciously, he was beginning to see the town from the point of view of an outsider. In a manner of speaking, he was now "outside money" himself. He turned to Israels and spoke in the low tones that both of them had instinctively adopted.

"There is not much of a house here to-night."

Israels looked slowly down at the empty seats, and it was a minute before he spoke—with forced casualness.

"Monday night," he remarked. "Always a bad night on the road."

His tone was perfectly nonchalant, but it still left a reluctant fragment of doubt in Bellsmith's mind. He suddenly began to wonder what a performance would pay if every seat were taken—what the "house would hold." He suddenly realized that every one of those empty seats meant two dollars and a half. Two of them meant five dollars. That was rather an alarming thought.

He tried to estimate the number of seats in the orchestra, taking one row as a basis. Odd that in all the hundreds of times he had sat in a theater he had never thought of doing that before. He had counted to twenty-seven in one row when another ripple of laughter swept over the house and he looked up at the stage. Charlie Barnes, in a big red wig and with a helpless, pathetic air, was holding the center of the scene in an eccentric dance, a form of amusement which Bellsmith had always peculiarly detested, but Israels leaned over to him.

"You want to watch that fellow, Charlie Barnes. He's the best drawing card you've got."

"You've got!" the words had come perfectly naturally from the manager beside him. More than anything else that had been said, more than anything else that could have been said, did they make Bellsmith at last realize that the company was his. It was a thrilling but at the same time a frightening thought. Suppose they should suddenly stop that performance up there on the stage, walk to the footlights, and calmly ask him what to do next.

As the act went on, however, there seemed to be less and less danger that he would be called on to take part. As Israels had said, the organization apparently "functioned like silk."

The scene was the same one, in front of a rustic tavern, which had appeared in the photographs in the lobby. In front of the tavern eight girls were dancing in the weaving, swaying step which they had rehearsed that afternoon. They parted and turned toward the tavern door, and in it appeared a smiling girl in a big garden hat. The audience greeted her appearance with the tentative, cautious wave of applause with which a provincial audience always greets every principal until it is sure which one is at last the expected "star." Even Bellsmith, from different motives, felt a sudden check at his heart, but it was not Tilly Marshall. It was Elsie Winner. With her blond hair and garden hat she was undeniably charming.

The comedian, who, in his stage character, apparently

had some acute reason for avoiding Miss Winner, suddenly turned at sight of her and tried vainly to hide himself behind a potted rose-bush about a foot tall, to the mild amusement of the audience, but Bellsmith laughed outright. It suddenly seemed to him acutely funny. He leaned over to whisper to Israel, but the latter had disappeared and Bellsmith found himself standing alone.

As the act went on, ushers, the check-room girl, occasionally Oliver, and at all times various ones of those unattached men who apparently have no occupation in life except that of standing in the darkened rear of a theater came and went, leaning a few moments against the high rail beside him and then passing on. Toward the end of the act Bellsmith heard one of the volunteers turn to Oliver.

"Same old stuff," he said, "is n't it?"

Oliver looked cautiously at Bellsmith and then mumbled something which he did not hear.

Between the acts, at Israel's suggestion, Bellsmith and he sauntered back of the scenes, not, this time, through the stage-door but most professionally through the little entrance behind the boxes. It was a most abrupt transition from red plush to bare brick and whitewash.

The very first person they saw was Tilly Marshall, hurrying, in costume, to the dressing-room corridor. At the sight of Bellsmith in company with the manager, who had not been one of the party on the previous evening, she stopped uncertainly.

"What in the world are you doing here?" she de-

manded. Her tone was unconsciously one of proprietorship, not merely that of a sister but that of a sister who was much older than he.

Israels could not resist the temptation to break the great news.

"Mr. Bellsmith," he announced, "can come in here any time he wants. He is the big boss now. He cracks the whip over us all. He has bought the show."

In the way of all bad news, something told Tilly Marshall that it was actually true. She stood transfixed, staring at them both, her face at once both grotesque and beautiful in its heavy make-up, her eyes abnormally large and starry behind their stiff spikes of heavily blackened lashes.

Israels repeated. "Bought it out of his pocket half an hour ago."

Tilly Marshall looked back at Bellsmith.

"You have n't!" she exclaimed.

Bellsmith nodded. "That 's true."

It was several seconds before Miss Marshall would consent to admit the worst; then she turned slowly to Israels.

"You ought to be ashamed of yourself," she remarked.

Israels put on a slight shade of an attitude toward women which would probably be called "kidding."

"Why?" he demanded. "What 's the matter?"

"You know well enough," retorted the girl, and without another word she marched off to her dressing-room.

Israels looked after her, grinning. "She does n't

seem to be pleased," he remarked, but Bellsmith made no reply. For the first time a genuine fear, a presentiment of disaster had settled over him, a far different feeling from the mere timidity which he had felt while negotiating with Israels.

At the close of the last act he again came behind the scenes—for, after all, that was really the whole thing for which he had paid forty-five thousand dollars—and walked to the Massapauk with Miss Marshall. There was no invitation about it, or suggestion. She fell in beside him as naturally as if it were now indeed an old story, but as they walked together out into the silent streets her air of resentment had distinctly not left her. Until they were well away from the theater she would say nothing at all except "Yes" and No," but Bellsmith knew that the great calamity was revolving over and over in her mind.

As usually happens he made the mistake of trying to break the silence jocularly.

"Even the ushers," he said, "have begun to call me by name."

"Oh, you don't know how I hate that!" the girl burst out at last. "The whole thing makes me feel more blue than I did before I knew you. Why, in heaven's name, did you ever let them do it? They only wanted you for your money."

"It was n't a case of that," argued Bellsmith. "The suggestion came entirely from me. At least the doctor and I cooked it up together."

"Then damn that doctor," exclaimed Miss Marshall.

"I 'd like to throttle him when I see him. Has n't even he any sense?"

"But why?" persisted Bellsmith. "What harm is it going to do? What is the worst that can happen?" A sudden perfunctory idea came to him. "You did n't suppose for a minute that I would use this as a chance to annoy you?"

"Oh, no, no!" The girl dismissed that idea impatiently. "But this show is already a horrible failure."

That idea said in words did bring Bellsmith up with a little chill. It had been growing on him with tiny presentiments all the evening, but to have it expressed thus coldly and finally was something that he would have avoided if he could, something that Israels, not at all from any motive of treachery but merely from the masculine instinct to avoid the unpleasant, would also have avoided. It was in fact the word that the entire organization of Harcourt & Gay had scrupulously avoided for two months. Miss Marshall, however, had no scruples.

"It 's just a plain frost," she repeated.

Bellsmith tried to argue weakly. "But it played in New York."

"Of course it did. If it had n't been a failure it would be playing there still."

"Well, in any case, it is n't anything so terrible," said Bellsmith with a forced lightness. "Then let it fail." He fell back on Dr. MacVickar for any argument. "At worst it won't cost any more than lots of things I might have done."

"Oh, it is n't that!" exclaimed the girl. "Don't you see that that has n't really anything to do with it?"

Both of them had known that they had only been skirting around the real truth of her resentment, but she was reaching it now.

"It is n't the money," she burst out, "in itself. It is just that I hate to see you made a fool of—especially by those creatures. It makes me shrivel."

"That's very—that's very dear of you," answered Bellsmith, "but if I was made a fool of, I made a fool of myself. You must n't blame them."

With another impatient gesture the girl dismissed all these cavilings. "But it looks like the same thing—to other people. I don't want them laughing at you."

Still she had not reached the actual root of the matter, but suddenly she made the plunge.

"You know it makes me just sick, really physically sick, to think of you having anything to do with the show business at all!"

"Why?" asked Bellsmith, now genuinely amazed.

"You know very well," answered the girl quietly. "Because I happen to be very fond of you."

She was silent for a moment and then continued.

"Outside of the show business you appeared to me like a rock of ages—clear and calm. Inside the show business you will be—oh! I don't know what—but not that any more."

"I'm sorry," said Bellsmith quietly.

He left her at the door of the hotel.

CHAPTER XXI

THE Pilgrim Trust Co. was the last business house in the East to install glass-topped desks in its private offices, but, when they were installed, its sheets of glass were heavier, more redoubtable, than those on any other desks in the universe. The sheet of glass on the desk of Judge Marker, the chief attorney and trust officer could have been used as the base of a Doric temple. It must have been more than an inch in thickness and was beveled in a manner that would have won the heart of Leonardo da Vinci. "I am as transparent to all men as the heavens above," that glass seemed to say, "but yet as profound as the depthless oceans."

In the exact center of this sheet of glass, on a Tuesday morning, lay a single object, a check for forty-five thousand dollars, a simple thing, so flat and clinging, as it lay there, as to seem a part of the glass itself, yet, at the same time, brought by the glass into high relief, a perfect focus for the eye from every part of the room. Behind the desk, but more essentially behind the check, sat Judge Marker himself with his clipped gray beard and his heavy gray tweeds, very much a small and indignant replica of the late King Edward.

This was the setting into which came Arnold Bellsmith and Herman Israels between eleven and twelve o'clock by appointment.

"Good morning, judge," greeted Bellsmith. He was not unaware of the check on the desk. One could n't be. He was not unaware of a guarded hostility in the attitude of Judge Marker, but he advanced into the room with a heartiness which was not at all feigned. Timid as he might be in the face of many things, he had never been timid in the face of the Pilgrim Trust Co. There were certain phases in which almost any one would have liked to be Bellsmith.

"Judge," he began, "I have a little transaction somewhat out of the ordinary."

He turned to introduce his companion. "Judge Marker, this is Mr. Israels."

The judge looked up at the swarthy manager with a cold suspicion that he made no attempt to conceal, but his diffidence had no effect whatsoever on Israels. Israels had made his way in the face of cold suspicion since his first day in the theatrical business.

"Pleased to meet you, judge," he said, heartily enough.

Bellsmith looked suggestively toward a row of chairs ranged along the wall, but Judge Marker gave no invitation and it remained for Bellsmith himself to act as surrogate host and bring a chair in each hand.

"Judge," began Bellsmith, as he sat down, his nonchalance, it must be confessed, beginning to waver a little under this frigid reception, "this is only a matter which will take you a minute or two. All I wish is to have you draw up a simple agreement or bill of sale between me and the firm of Harcourt & Gay of—of—"

"Harcourt Theater Building, New York City," snapped Israels, promptly.

The judge looked at the speaker with a gesture of irritation. He placed his palms solidly against the edge of his desk as if he feared that, subconsciously, even his own hands might play him some trick and that he had better keep them where he could watch them.

"An agreement for what?" he demanded.

"An agreement," explained Bellsmith, "transferring from the firm of Harcourt & Gay to me the entire rights and property, beginning at midnight last night, of the musical comedy named 'Eleanor.'"

The judge did not move a muscle.

"My dear Mr. Bellsmith," he said very quietly, "I think that you had better explain somewhat further."

Bellsmith smiled. "I beg your pardon. Perhaps I should. I purchased, last evening, the entire rights and property of the play which is now being performed at the Lyceum Theater. Perhaps you have seen it? Mr. Israels represents the owners. I wish you to draw up an agreement which will make the thing binding."

The judge reached forth both hands to the check and stroked it slowly down on the glass, as if to make it more fully than ever an integral part of the Pilgrim Trust Co.

"Then that," he remarked with a deadly calm, "is, I presume, the explanation of this check, which was presented here by the Second National Bank for collection this morning."

"Exactly," replied Bellsmith. "It was given last night."

The judge turned to Israels. "This check was offered to the Second National Bank in payment for a New York draft three minutes after the bank opened this morning. It appears, sir, that you didn't intend to lose much time."

Israels shrugged. "It's not good business to let money lie idle."

Bellsmith, however, had no intention of changing allegiance. "That check was given in perfect good faith, Judge Marker. Would it not be best if you would draw up the agreement?"

The judge abruptly shoved himself away from his desk, as if that act in itself broke off a circuit and put the whole Pilgrim Trust Co. out of the matter altogether.

"I shall do nothing so ridiculous."

"Very well, judge," said Bellsmith. "I am sorry, but, if you will not draw up this agreement, it will be necessary for me to consult a private attorney. But I naturally thought that you would like to know what went into it."

The judge eased back to his desk, and again his hand began to stroke the small sheet of paper.

"Now, Mr. Bellsmith," he reasoned, "what is this folly, anyway? Do you realize what you are doing?"

"Perfectly," said Bellsmith. "If I wish to invest some money in the theatrical business is there any reason why I should not do so?"

"Yes, I think there is," answered the judge, calmly. "Do you know the first thing about it?"

"As much as I do about any other business," replied Bellsmith. "Harcourt & Gay, as you could easily find

out, is a responsible firm, one of the leading theatrical firms in the country. If I should invest this same amount in bonds or real estate would there be any question about it?"

The judge smiled faintly. "If you did it at midnight with parties unknown to us and if the check were presented at a bank window about three minutes after the banks of the city opened, I think that there certainly *would* be a question about it."

The judge smoothed the check to its full length and looked at it thoughtfully "Just how did you intend to pay this check, Mr. Bellsmith?"

"My check has never been questioned for any amount," replied Bellsmith.

"Because there has never been any occasion to do so," commented the judge. "You don't think that you have forty-five thousand dollars in cash in the Pilgrim Trust Co., do you?"

"I don't know how much I have got," replied Bellsmith, "but I certainly do know that I have securities on deposit here which would warrant your honoring my check for several times that amount."

"Well, it won't be honored," replied the judge, suddenly and emphatically. "I can tell you that now. Neither I nor the Pilgrim Trust Co. will be a party to any such folly. We all of us think too much of you to allow you to take such an idiotic step."

"I am very sorry," insisted Bellsmith, "but my check has been drawn and given in good faith, and my check will be honored. Furthermore, it will be honored before noon at the Pilgrim Trust Co."

"But how can it be," argued the judge, "if the money is n't there?"

"I can deposit the money to cover it."

"But, I ask you, where will you get the money?"

"If necessary I can instruct you to sell some securities outright," replied Bellsmith.

"We simply won't do it."

"Very well, then, I shall have to withdraw them myself and pledge them at another bank or sell them through a broker."

The judge laughed mirthlessly and a little impatiently. "Now, Mr. Bellsmith, we can't allow you to take any such action as that."

"But how can you stop me?" demanded Bellsmith blandly.

The judge was silent. He could n't stop him, and he knew that he could n't; but he had not been at all sure that Bellsmith knew it. For three generations a word from the Pilgrim Trust to the Bellsmith family had been as a friendly mandate from a friendly bench.

"Besides," added Bellsmith quietly, "you know that I have other property—real estate for example."

"Real estate?" echoed Judge Marker in horror.

Bellsmith nodded. "Any bank in the city would lend me any amount on the various properties."

"Mr. Bellsmith!" pleaded the judge, now shocked to the depths of his being. In Leicester there was something even more sacred about real estate than about any other form of property.

"You don't mean to say," almost begged the judge, "that you would go so far as to mortgage that real estate

which has stood clear in your family for generations?"

"I should certainly not like to," admitted Bellsmith, "but you must remember that it is also several generations since any check of the Bellsmith family has been refused by the Pilgrim Trust Co."

The judge sat hot and despondent. Like Dr. MacVickar and like Margaret, he had just begun to realize that at the most unexpected moments this childlike young man could be most damnably definite. He shifted to another and, as he thought, a wiser tack.

"Mr. Bellsmith," he said, almost gently, "I am sure that you understand that I am acting purely for your own interests, and I absolutely must refuse to let you take such a foolish step. You simply must not allow that check to be presented for payment. The matter could be arranged very simply with the officers of the Second National. They have not yet sent it through the clearing-house."

He turned, almost appealingly, to Israels. "I am sure that this—this gentleman will understand that you were carried away by your enthusiasm and, when he learns how your friends feel about it, he will see things from our point of view. Of course, any slight forfeit that he might feel would compensate him—"

Quickly as lightning Israels snapped out. "We're not black-mailers, judge. If you want to find out anything about Harcourt & Gay just telephone right now to any bank in New York City. I guess that you don't happen to know that Harcourt & Gay do a bigger annual business than any client you've got in your whole trust company."

Judge Marker saw that he had made a false move, but neither was he particularly impressed. He raised his hand.

"Now, my good young man. I understand that, I understand that, but equally Mr. Bellsmith's family have been our clients for a great many years, and it is not our intention that his good nature and lack of experience—"

It was the very worst tack that he could have taken, and Bellsmith himself stopped him abruptly.

"Judge, I understand perfectly that you are acting for my best interests, but my mind is absolutely made up. I have purchased this—this property, and I intend to complete the purchase. If you really wish to assist me, you can draw the agreement properly and in order."

For a long, long minute the judge sat in exasperated silence. Then abruptly he punched a bell under the edge of his desk, and a highly decorous young man appeared from an adjoining room. The judge slowly peeled the check from the glass. One was really surprised to see that it came off so easily. He handed it to the clerk and spoke very gruffly, for there was at least one person at whom he could still be angry.

"Take this down to Mr. Carruthers," he ordered, "and tell them it's got to go through."

As the young man left the room a faint smile passed over the face of Israel. Luckily, however, the judge did not see it. With an air of bitter resignation he drew a sheet of paper from a drawer and took up a pen. He

turned to Bellsmith as if the latter had just entered the office.

"Very well, then," he said. "Now what is it you want to do?"

As Israels and Bellsmith together walked out of the building, Israels at least was in very high spirits.

"Good boy!" he applauded. "Don't let them bluff you. If the money 's yours he can't touch you."

"I know that he can't," replied Bellsmith, "but he can make things disagreeable. Then a certain pang of remorse, a certain touch of the old Bellsmith, began to creep over him. "But after all he 's such a decent old chap! I really did hate to upset him. It has been years, I know, since anybody has disagreed with him."

After lunch they returned to sign the agreement, accompanied by another lawyer whom Israels had dug up with the perfect genius of his kind for selecting exactly that member of the Leicester County bar who would be most objectionable to Judge Marker.

Certain changes were suggested by Israels and certain ones by Judge Marker. Two copies were made and signed and witnessed by the decorous clerk from the adjoining room.

"Well, that 's that!" said Bellsmith when they again reached the street.

Israels looked at his watch. "I think I 'll go back to the hotel and telephone Harcourt & Gay." Then suddenly a funny look came over his face. "I suppose I 'm not working for them any more. I 'm working for you, Mr. Bellsmith."

Bellsmith smiled, but it was very wanly. He felt exceedingly tired. He remembered dully his daily engagement with Dr. MacVickar and telephoned for a reprieve, but Dr. MacVickar had been called away from his office on an urgent case. Glad enough to have it so, Bellsmith went home, took off his coat and shoes, and lay down on his bed for an hour, while the winter sun danced through the drawn shades, and the traffic of Leicester rumbled along, outside on the Main Street asphalt.

He must have fallen asleep for suddenly in a vague, jumpy start he was aware of the telephone at his bedside ringing shrilly.

"Hello! This is Israels talking. Mr. Bellsmith, here's a fine kettle of fish. Tilly Marshall has broke down completely, and that doctor of yours has sent her off to some hospital in the country. I just got word when I got back. What are we going to do? Shall we put Poppy Vaughan on to-night?"

"All right," said Bellsmith, rolling off the bed and upon his feet. "I'll come down right now. Where are you? At the Stansfield?"

He put on his coat and shoes, feeling very rumped and unclean, and hurried on down to the lower hall. He called to William, who was hovering in the dining-room:

"William, I've got a sudden call down town. I won't be home to dinner and probably not before midnight."

But William, instead of his usual "Very good, sir,"

came rustling out with his queer comic air of shocked amazement.

"Mr. Bellsmith," he whispered, "there's a man waiting to see you in the reception-room. I was n't going to call you until you waked up. I think—I think 'e's some kind of a bailiff."

As Bellsmith turned into the little reception-room a stranger rose to meet him, an odd little man with a huge mustache and an abnormal watch-chain.

"Mr. Bellsmith?" he asked briskly, and as Bellsmith nodded he handed him some folded papers.

"I'm Deputy Sheriff MacDonald," he said. "I serve you this order of the probate court in an action instituted by the Pilgrim Trust Co."

Uncertainly Bellsmith took the papers. "Well, what do I do with these?" he asked. "Do I have to go to jail with you or something?"

The man laughed. "Oh, no, it's not as bad as that, sir. You just have to accept the service, and you've done that already."

"Have I?" asked Bellsmith vaguely.

As soon as the officer had gone he opened the papers and found a special injunction prohibiting him from withdrawing, concealing, hypothecating, transferring, or otherwise diminishing any such property or properties, real or personal, as lay within the jurisdiction of the court pending an action instituted against him by the Pilgrim Trust Co., as interested party. The action, he further learned, was for the appointment of a "committee of person and estate."

Committee of person and estate. That did n't sound so formidable, but what did it mean? Bellsmith sought out the big dictionary in the library.

"Committee of person," he read, "See 'conservator.' "

"Just as you say," mused Bellsmith to the big book, and so he looked up "Conservator."

He found it.

"Conservator. A person appointed by a court of law to superintend idiots, lunatics and others who are temporarily or permanently irresponsible, to manage their property for them and to protect it from wastage or design."

CHAPTER XXII

THERE are certain moments when it is quite possible to go behind the scenes of a theater without disillusionment, but midnight on a Saturday night, on the road, is not one of those moments.

It was midnight, almost to a dot, on Saturday night, as Bellsmith and Israels stood in the dingy space adjoining the wings of the Lyceum. An hour before, the musical comedy "Eleanor" had rung down its curtain. Whether or not it would ever be rung up again depended wholly on the present conference between Bellsmith and Israels.

In the front of the house, beyond the asbestos curtain, the lights had now been entirely extinguished, and the auditorium was a black void in which even the rows of seats could not be distinguished. From the little door behind the boxes, now propped open, there came back, however, a slow, drifting breath of warm air and a faint sense of vanished humanity. The stage itself, which bulked in a vague, cavernous gloom over Israel's shoulder was lighted only by reflection from the passage in which they stood and from its own looming white-washed wall, which seemed to lighten the blackness as a white road or a white building will do on a starlit night.

It was cold out there on the stage. The fires in the

boiler-room had been banked for the week-end the minute the audience was out of the house, and the narrow space in which the men were standing was tempered only by the electric lights and by the near presence of thirty or forty persons who were waiting in a dull despondency for the final result of the conference between the manager and the man who now only in contempt was known as the "owner."

At Bellsmith's right was the only brilliantly lighted spot in all the surrounding gloom—the corridor which led to the dressing-rooms of the principals. Overhead, the spiral staircase circled up into regions black and echoing, for the members of the chorus had long since finished dressing and packing and, with the minor musicians and the mechanics, were waiting, bundled in hats and overcoats in various parts of the darkened stage, some sitting on trunks or boxes, some standing in disconsolate groups. Occasionally a thin laugh, a murmuring voice, or a bit of skylarking would come from the gray depths of the empty stage, but for the most part the company waited in dull, stolid silence.

Bellsmith, his collar turned up to his ears, studied a printed form, scrawled over with marks in blue pencil, which had come from the box-office during the last act. He looked up at Israels.

"Well," he said slowly, "what do you suggest?"

Israels shrugged.

"Come on in here," he said suddenly. "There's no use freezing to death while we talk it over."

Glad of any suggestion, Bellsmith followed him slowly down the lighted corridor past the open doors of the

tiny dressing-rooms. In each one of them, in a curious isolation, sat one or at most two of the principals, each of whom glanced up eagerly or stolidly as the two men passed. In the first sat Maida Maine, the leading woman—fuming. She was bundled to the ears in her fur coat, her colored maid, with hands in her lap, sitting silently in front of her. Israels paused in the doorway.

“Miss Maine, I’d forgotten that you were still here. I can’t tell you anything yet. I’ll let you know the first thing in the morning.”

The next dressing-room had been Tilly Marshall’s. Poppy Vaughn had been using it for the last week, but Poppy Vaughn was not a person who courted solitude, and the little room stood absolutely stripped and vacant. There was a curious irony for Bellsmith in that poignantly empty room. Tilly Marshall, his only reason for this disastrous adventure, had left the company the day he had entered it.

In the next room Poppy Vaughn was talking in low tones with Elsie Winner. The two girls stopped guiltily as he passed and looked up at him quite as if he had been a stranger. In the next dressing-room Bellony, the tenor, sat smoking his inevitable cigar, appearing much more at home than any of the others in his sullen solitude.

At the end of the corridor Israels pushed without ceremony into the dressing-room occupied by Charlie Barnes, the comedian, the only room in the row which suggested anything except desolation, possibly because, alone of the whole company, the comedian had not finished packing. His last-act costume was still draped

half in and half out of his trunk, and his tin make-up box was still open under the little square mirror on his dressing-shelf.

The barrack lawyer of the "Eleanor" company had been a very busy and very unpleasant man since the rumor had come to his ears (to his ears first, of course) that the mad young millionaire who had purchased the "Eleanor" show, had got into some sort of rumpus "with his people" and that the show might never go any farther than Leicester. Throughout the Saturday matinée, as the decision had grown more and more certain but had still hung fire, Barnes had been tramping incessantly up and down the circular iron staircase to the chorus rooms, and after the evening performance, half dressed and still in full make-up, he had only come back to his own room when the lights had been turned off in the upper corridors. He was standing now in snuff-colored trousers and waistcoat and pink shirt-sleeves, laboriously folding the grotesque costumes which he might never put on again. As the manager and Bellsmith entered, he glanced over his shoulder but immediately turned again to his packing.

"Still busy, Charlie?" asked Israels.

The comedian grunted a non-committal reply. Very few pleasant remarks had been passed in that corridor that evening, and none of them by Charlie Barnes. Israels was apparently unaffected by the underlying current of hostility, but in Bellsmith it cut.

There have been odd stories told of men dying of thirst in a brackish river, of mountaineers freezing to death within sight of a tropical plain, but for nearly a

week now Arnold Bellsmith had known what it was to ramble around his own home city actually a wealthy man and still virtually penniless.

To no one did it appear more incredible than it did to Bellsmith himself. At first, indeed, he had refused to take the legal injunction with any seriousness at all. One can understand, sometimes, the point of view of anarchists, for the fact does remain that to people like Bellsmith the law most often appears as something which applies to any one but themselves. Or, rather, their inclination is to confuse "a lawyer" with "the law." A few confidential words with the old family attorney, they feel, and in some mysterious manner the affair is entirely off their hands.

In this case, however, the old family attorney had been entirely on the other side. That was, in fact, the real crux of the whole situation. In a legal system like that of Leicester, where a gentle paternalism still nods on the bench, the right kind of old family lawyer, with a few nods and lifts of his eyebrows, can sew up a wayward son as effectively as, in other circumstances, he can take the worry completely off his shoulders; and, since the "Nero" episode with its various sequels, a growing opinion in Leicester had felt that "Young Bellsmith" needed sewing up very badly indeed.

Whether or not the step that had been taken by Judge Marker had been really legal was one which was argued among lawyers for months afterward, but it had certainly been effective. Although he did not know it, Bellsmith had been under sentence at the very moment at which he had signed the transfer with Israels, for,

during the lunch hour, the canny old judge had obtained a session in chambers at which another attorney on behalf of the Pilgrim Trust Co. as holder of important properties, had asked that a temporary committee of the estate be appointed over the affairs of Arnold Bellsmith. At that Judge Marker, recognized for twenty years as the Bellsmith attorney, had entered an appearance and made no objection. After a brief and informal statement of the circumstances behind the action, even the probate judge had not asked the questions which normally he must have asked. It was well enough understood that this was a family affair, the kind of thing to be settled in low-voiced conferences, as much "out of court" as possible. For the Bellsmith estate really was to the older bankers and lawyers much more than a very large holding. It was a landmark, it was a sentimental institution. In the eyes of those city fathers, the excesses of its young owner were not, as the latter had supposed, his private affairs, but dangerous attacks undermining the respectability of their own social order. 4

Of course Judge Marker knew as well as any one else that his flimsy injunction could not survive any serious attempt to break it down, but he had never intended that it should. All that he asked was that it should hold long enough for "that gang" (meaning Israels) to get out of town and for Bellsmith to come to what the Pilgrim Trust Co. had decided should be his senses. Judge Marker knew that the Fabian methods of court procedure would play sufficiently into his hands. In a week or two the whole thing would "blow over"—"blow over" being a trusted anodyne with men like

Judge Marker. So long as any further drains on the estate could be shut off, the thing would be cheap even at forty-five thousand dollars.

But a period of a week or two is a long, long time, a prohibitive time, in the life of a musical comedy booked months ahead and already launched on its schedule. Not that Judge Marker cared anything for that. Judge Marker would have wrecked "Parsifal" rather than alter the sacred routine of the Pilgrim Trust Co., but the result had been to make Bellsmith much more of a victim than he had intended.

Between Tuesday and Saturday night, in short, Bellsmith had found himself in the simple, incontrovertible position of being an employer of fifty-eight highly paid persons and the owner of an extravagant property with only such money as he might earn with the enterprise itself to carry it on.

Of course it could n't be done. Israels knew that it could n't be done. The whole company knew that it could n't be done. Even Harcourt & Gay had not been able to do it. Bellsmith had been welcomed into the company as an unlimited asset, not as a very distinct liability, and, when word began to seep through the company of what had occurred, there set in at once an utter demoralization. Tilly Marshall's collapse had already left a bad gap, and there was even a rumor that her desertion had something to do with her own disillusionment in regard to Bellsmith. Maida Maine, the leading woman, flared up in an instant when she heard of the transfer and proceeded to sulk outright through her remaining performances. Charlie Barnes played with

his whole attention back stage, and the organization which, despite Israels's words, had never been "smooth as silk" became in three days what it always had been—most unmistakable shoddy. From actual returns for the first three days of the new ownership, "Eleanor" had shown a deficit of eleven hundred-odd dollars.

For a day or two, Israels had based a faint gambler's hope on the sensational advertising which would result from the announcement that Leicester's own Nero had purchased a musical comedy. Like "The Courier" itself, Israels had a great deal of faith in the drawing power of a sinner. "The Courier" had indeed needed no hint from a press-agent to print the news in display all over its first page on Wednesday morning, but the results had been, if anything, the exact contrary of those which Israels had expected. After all, notoriety is only an illegitimate sister of fame. The effect of the new "Courier" story had been, if anything, to turn patrons away from "Eleanor." The better people in Leicester found it rather repugnant. The rest found it rather stale. At any rate, those ominous back rows in the Lyceum were hardly better filled on Thursday and Friday than they had been on Monday and Tuesday under the waning auspices of Messrs. Harcourt & Gay.

And now it was Saturday night. The salaries had been paid to the minute. For that, at least, Bellsmith could be devoutly thankful, but a long, expensive jump to Troy, New York, had been scheduled for Sunday. To make this jump and face outright expenditures of thousands of dollars a week there remained eighty or ninety dollars in Israels's cash-box and three or four

hundred dollars in Bellsmith's private checking-account which was still allowed him as pocket-money by the trust company as conservator *pendente lite*.

Meanwhile in the dressing-rooms, in the corridors, and on the dark and gloomy stage waited the silent and disconsolate groups in obedience to a notice on the call-board that after the Saturday night performance the whole company would wait at the theater for further orders.

CHAPTER XXIII

FOR a long moment silence continued in the tiny dressing-room while the little comedian slowly and painfully packed his costumes, while Israels sat stolidly chewing at his imaginary toothpick, and while Bellsmith, slouched in a chair, stared moodily at the blue-penciled figures in his hand.

"Well," he repeated mechanically, "what do you suggest?"

Israels did not reply at once. He was puzzled, honestly puzzled. The ups and downs of fortune had been his own lot for many years. They did not depress him as they did Bellsmith, but this was a new sort of problem for him. Like most men of his kind, he had always regarded men of Bellsmith's class as operating on a special principle, one having no relation to the usual economic laws. The average New Yorker when he speaks of "a rich man from out of town" instinctively pictures him as inordinately rich, richer than any New Yorker could ever be. Israels had always classed men like Bellsmith as having an inexhaustible gold-mine; one which could be drawn on without either limit or sense. Parisians think in the same way about people from Argentina. In the present crisis Israels was faced with unmistakable facts, but even now he could only accept them mentally because it suited his own plans rather than otherwise.

Israels chewed his imaginary toothpick for a few seconds more. Already, without any actual lack of allegiance but merely because he had known from the start that the thing was hopeless, he himself was, in his own mind, instinctively getting out from under.

"Well, Mr. Bellsmith," he said at last, "I can't see but what you're at the end of your rope."

Bellsmith looked around the room in a helpless desperation, and as he did so he became aware that the little comedian, who was still apparently absorbed in his packing, was really listening intently.

"But it's so maddening," remonstrated Bellsmith, "and really so foolish. I have money, or property rather, enough to carry this show to the end of the season without earning another cent."

"Yes, but what good does it do you?" asked Israels, curtly. "Money you might get in a month is no use to us now."

"But there must be some kind of credit I can get."

"You can't get credit for railroad fares."

They were only hashing over and over the facts that they had already covered a dozen times, and both of them knew it, yet both dreaded coming to the actual point to which they knew that they must come at last. Israels straightened himself in his chair, not without a certain real pity.

"Mr. Bellsmith," he said, "I don't like to admit myself beaten any more than you do but, as a business man, I know—and you know, too—that there is only one thing to do—throw up the sponge. Check up your loss

to experience and let it go at that. After all, you have had your fling. You can afford it."

"What do you mean?" asked Bellsmith, in a deathly stillness.

"I mean disband the company to-night."

As he said the words that every one in the corridor had been dreading, the little comedian threw a sharp look at him over his shoulder. He said nothing, but Bellsmith had not missed the look.

"But is it fair?" asked Bellsmith, weakly.

For answer Israels merely shrugged, but suddenly the little comedian turned from his dressing-table, both hands, at the ends of his pink shirt-sleeves, held out before him.

"No! I can tell you. It *ain't* fair!" he burst out.

Israels looked up impatiently but then seemed to realize that nothing could matter now and resumed his gloomy cud-chewing.

"No, sir! It *ain't* fair!" repeated the comedian. "Look at here, Mr. Bellsmith. Do you realize what you're doing? Do you realize that you've got fifty-eight men and women out there who were earning an honest living until you came butting in and took the bread and butter out of their mouths?"

"Oh, shut up, Charlie," interrupted Israels. "It ain't Mr. Bellsmith's fault."

"Then whose fault is it?" demanded Barnes, and Bellsmith, for his part, made no attempt to reply. He sat there under the storm of abuse which followed with his head bowed and his eyes still fixed on the meaningless figures in his hand, for he knew that it was all merited.

The furious little man in front of him had only said what he had realized with increasing bitterness each successive day, that the price of his own cavalier fling into active life had been, in this case, the sole livelihood of fifty-eight harmless persons.

He looked up almost fearfully at the stunted little figure which had now moved two steps away from the dressing-table and stood over him in an attitude that was almost a physical threat, an attitude that would have been ridiculous in any less tragic circumstances, for Charlie Barnes was not more than five feet tall. Yet, like many other comedians, he had, when shorn of his make-up, a prematurely old, wizened face, like that of a jockey or a light-weight fighter, which made his expression almost formidable.

"Do you realize what you're doing?" repeated Barnes. "What is it to you? A skylark! An adventure! What is the price of a show to you? Yes, *you* can afford it, but we can't. Do you realize that there are men and women out there who haven't even got the money to take them back to New York? Did you happen to know that one of those girls is supporting two children out of forty-five dollars a week and paying her hotel bills on the road? How much do you think she's got laid aside to meet this? And what good will it do most of us to get back to New York, anyway? The season is spoiled. Everything in New York is filled up. It means filling in—bum parts in pictures, part-time vaudeville, doing halls, anything we can get until next summer. Some of us have got to chip in now to help out the others."

"They will be taken care of," said Bellsmith, more from a sort of patrician habit than with any real idea of how he might do it.

"Taken care of!" scoffed Barnes. "What is this? A charity institution? What do you think we are? Beggars? What we want is our jobs, the same jobs we had all secure before you came horning in. To hell with you and your 'taken care of.'"

But Bellsmith had had time to collect a certain measure of thought. He looked up without anger.

"But, Mr. Barnes," he protested, "you must all have known that the show had been losing money right along even before I ever took it over. It was only a matter of time before it must have closed up, anyway."

"But not like this," snorted Barnes. "Not at ten minutes' notice."

Bellsmith looked toward Israels. "What would Harcourt & Gay have done?"

Israels stirred uneasily. Except for the momentary discomfort of it, this breaking up of the "Eleanor" show meant little to him personally. If anything, it was a relief to cut clear from a losing venture, but curiously the man was still faintly loyal to Bellsmith, even if he did consider him a fool. He chewed a moment in a manner so realistic that one could almost see the imaginary toothpick twirling around in his lips. He nodded toward Barnes.

"I suppose it was like he said. We were nursing the thing along in hopes that when we got to Chicago and some of the really big cities we could draw business enough to keep it alive for the season."

Bellsmith pondered a moment.

"Then," he asked suddenly, "if I could scrape up enough money somehow to get the show to Chicago we might pull through?"

Israels did not reply, for the answer to that question was the single unhappy fact which he had held back from Bellsmith in a series of unhappy revelations.

"To tell the truth, Mr. Bellsmith," he admitted at last, "it would n't even do you any good if you could get to Chicago. You see, theaters in Chicago are scarcer than they are in New York. It was n't 'Eleanor' as a show that had that booking but Harcourt & Gay as a firm. They need that Chicago date too badly for something else to let you have it now."

"But, look here, I bought the booking."

"So you did—except Chicago. You know when we wrote the agreement I made an exception of that and you agreed to it."

Bellsmith nodded. He remembered now that, on that morning when he was consenting to anything, he had made that exception which had seemed so far in the future as to be trivial.

He looked over at Barnes, who had not moved from his threatening attitude, but the explanation had done nothing to mollify the comedian. Barnes was siding with Israels. It was not a question of one less date for the "Eleanor" show but a question of the "show business" against a very lubberly outsider.

"But the other booking?" asked Bellsmith. "The theaters in Troy and Rochester and Buffalo? What will happen if we don't keep our dates?"

Israels laughed without mirth. "Don't you worry about them. They 'll be only too glad of those dates for other shows that are making more money than we are and ask for a smaller percentage. A dozen shows will be rushing for them as soon as the dates are open. Not Troy perhaps, that 's too soon, but the others."

"In other words," said Bellsmith, as slowly and metally as if he were reciting a ritual, "in other words, I have two happy alternatives. One is closing to-night and sending these people back to New York without a job. The other is playing to certain loss all the way from here to Chicago and then not even getting the booking in Chicago."

Israels shrugged. "You know, Mr. Bellsmith—," but Bellsmith knew what he intended to say and forestalled him.

"Oh, I 'm not blaming you," he interrupted. "You did n't cheat me. I bought this thing blind and now I intend to pay for it."

"Pay for it!" snorted Barnes, suddenly coming back into the argument. "It 's we who pay for your fun. You have n't got much to lose by it."

But Bellsmith looked up at him fixedly and with such an odd expression on his face that Barnes stopped, almost frightened. Bellsmith slowly rose to his feet.

"There is just one man in Leicester," he said deliberately, "that I want to talk to before I make any decision."

Israels looked up with a faint, but very faint, hope, for "talk to" in his lexicon meant only one thing—borrow money.

"Well, then," he asked, "is it necessary to hold all these people here any longer?"

Bellsmith shook his head. "No, you had better let them go. Tell them that I will give them word as to what I am going to do to-morrow morning. If we still intend to go on to Troy we shall still have time to make it on Monday. What time had we better meet here? Nine o'clock?"

Israels pulled a humorously long face.

"Mr. Bellsmith," he said, "nothing shows better than that that you don't know anything about the show business. To-morrow's Sunday, you know. Unless you still want to get that morning train you'd better say eleven."

"All right, then; eleven," agreed Bellsmith.

Israels paused a moment to see whether any more definite news was forthcoming and then went out, while the little comedian turned to his packing. In bitter humiliation Bellsmith sat listening to the sound of Israels passing along the corridor, heard the low murmur of a few brief words as he stopped at each dressing-room, occasionally a curt question or two in reply, and then a scraping of chairs as each member of the cast rose and went out.

Before the manager had reached the stage, where the main body of the company was waiting, Barnes snapped down the top of his trunk and followed, without a word or a look.

With ears strained by his sensitiveness Bellsmith heard the low hum and bustle as Israels and Barnes together reached the stage. There came sounds of murmured

questions and shuffling and moving about, but no apparent rebellion, no mutinous protests. It would almost have been a relief to Bellsmith if there had been, but the rank and file of the "Eleanor" company still accepted the word of their "owner" as final, still accepted with relief even the faintest postponement of disaster, still welcomed at least one more night of hope as mummers have always done since the days of the first theater and probably always will until the days of the last.

Bellsmith did not move until the last steps had departed, until the stage-door, with its creaking clock-weight on a rope, had swung to for the last time and the night watchman had begun to put out the lights in the adjoining dressing-rooms. Then he rose painfully and went out into the corridor. Under the single light that remained he met Israels coming briskly back. The manager put his hand in his pocket and drew out a sealed envelope.

"By the way, Mr. Bellsmith, here's Miss Marshall's salary up to to-night. I thought possibly you could get it to her. In case we bust up—"

The two men looked quietly at each other for a moment.

Bellsmith took the envelope. "All right. I'll see that she gets it. Good night."

Israels turned and walked rapidly down the corridor, while Bellsmith remained standing by the dressing-room door, the little brown envelope in his hand. He could feel the bills folded thickly inside it. Seventy-five dollars, he knew it was now, a pathetic little roll but probably the last money that Tilly Marshall could earn

for a long, long time. And now he was cutting off the only way in which he himself could give her any more.

As he heard the outer door slam behind Israels he followed down the corridor, but some lingering attraction, probably the attraction of repulsion, induced him to walk a few steps out on the echoing stage, now in pitch blackness. He became again acutely aware of its queer musty smell. Like a mist now it seemed to rise up out of the floor.

The watchman, who had been waiting for him to leave, turned out the last light in Barnes' dressing-room and came stumping down the corridor. He was a cheery little man, good natured enough, but plainly eager to get back to the superior warmth and cosiness of the boiler-room.

Bellsmith muttered a word and passed out into the winter night. Far up at the head of the alley his own limousine was waiting, the globe light inside it showing the spotless gray broadcloth of the upholstery. The patient Keefe sat nodding on the box.

Bellsmith's own life, he realized, went on just the same. The trust company paid for all that, his big house, his servants, his cars, his carefully ordered meals, even down to his special cigars, but he could see now how that luxurious limousine must have appeared to the eyes of the members of the company wending their anxious way up the littered alley, how it must have flaunted itself in their faces. He wondered whether a single one of them really believed that he could not lay his hands on a cent of ready money outside of his almost extinguished bank-account.

Half-way up the alley he heard rapid steps behind him and heard his name spoken.

"Mr. Bellsmith!"

He turned, and the little comedian, Charlie Barnes, came up beside him, looking more pitiful than ever with his overcoat open and his brown derby hat drawn over his eyes.

"Mr. Bellsmith," began the comedian, with a complete and suddenly abject change of manner. "Mr. Bellsmith, I hope you did n't take wrong what I said just now in the dressing-room. I lost my temper. I'm always that way but I did n't mean it."

As he spoke he sniffled violently between almost every word as if he had a terrible cold in his head and suddenly, with an immense wrench at his own heart, Bellsmith realized that the little man was actually crying.

Bellsmith reached out his hand and put it on the other man's shoulder. He hardly had to raise it above his waist to do so.

"My dear fellow," he said, "don't you suppose that I know that everything you said was deserved?"

"Oh, no, Mr. Bellsmith," protested Barnes. "You really did n't know what you were doing. I can see now that we won't get anywhere by throwing stones."

He fell into silence for a moment except for his incessant sniffing.

To the end of his life Bellsmith knew that he should remember that strange, pathetic scene in that deserted and filthy midnight alley. Two weeks before in what wildest dream could he have believed that he, Arnold

Bellsmith, opener and shutter of windows, fusser and fumer over his nerves, would be standing there in the darkness while in front of him a little eccentric comedian talked between sobs, while in the street at the end of the alley the footsteps of a solitary pedestrian echoed in the cold night air, while a smell of stale coffee still lingered from the restaurant and, probably, a gaunt, prowling cat went sneaking and poking around the long line of garbage-cans.

"You really meant well, Mr. Bellsmith," the comedian stammered on. "My head went back on me because this show meant so much. It was my first real chance after twenty-seven years in the sticks, in wagon shows, in hick comedies, in burlesque and black-face. I'm sorry. I apologize."

There was nothing really that Bellsmith could answer. An uncomfortable silence fell between them; then slowly, with more control of himself, the comedian went on.

"Mr. Bellsmith, there is no real reason why this show should fail if you could only raise money to keep it going just three or four weeks longer. I know that the company has been losing money ever since we went out, but there ain't any real reason why we should. You've got a good company here. It's a good season. The public ain't asking much. The show's got stuff in it if it was only played up right. I could tell you a thing or two if you'd only listen."

It all seemed so useless now, but Bellsmith, like Barnes himself, was in a mood to pluck at the wildest ray of possible hope.

"What's been the matter?" he asked listlessly. "Why has n't the show been making money?"

"Oh, it's a long story," replied the comedian. He shivered slightly. "Say, ain't there some place where we can go and talk quietly? I've got something I want to say."

"Why, yes," replied Bellsmith. "My house. Come along."

Together they continued up the alley. Keefe woke with a jerk and started the motor. Bellsmith laid his hand on the limousine door.

"Keefe," he said, "I'm sorry to have kept you waiting so late," but Keefe was entirely good natured.

"Oh, that's all right, Mr. Bellsmith. The last bout was only over about half an hour ago. I won a hundred and twenty-five dollars. Seventy-five on a knock-out and fifty on a draw."

Despite themselves both Bellsmith and Barnes laughed outright. They did not mention the subject again, but unconsciously both of them began to feel better. Seventy-five on a knock-out and fifty on a draw.

CHAPTER XXIV

IF he had been a strange figure in his own dressing-room, little Charlie Barnes was a stranger one as he took off his coat and sat down stiffly in a big chair in Bellsmith's library. With his shabby brown suit, his worn, wizened face, and his little fringe of stiff, belligerent hair, there was something about him, in that background, that brought strongly to Bellsmith's mind the memory of his plain-clothes policeman.

As Bellsmith leaned over to light the fire under the old-fashioned marble mantel, the comedian's eyes roamed over the room. Modern opinion would have considered it rather dowdy and rococo, that room, but to the little Irishman it was regal in its magnificence.

Charlie Barnes had told very truly his own story, back there in the alley, and all that the failure of the "Eleanor" show would mean to him personally. A man of no education whatever and of talents that were only mediocre, he had, nevertheless, that grim, driving assurance of his own powers that lies somewhere in the broad boundary between a high form of aggressiveness and a low form of genius. Absorbing constantly, by a species of objective intelligence, a vast experience in the pure craftsmanship of his art, gripping whatever he gained with a fierce tenacity that was constantly overreaching itself, the little man had eventually forced

himself up to the very top line of the second-class actor. Along this line he had bumped and fretted for eight or ten years until an accident had brought him to the notice of Harcourt & Gay and into the "Eleanor" company, where an unmistakable finish in his performance, a certain old-fashioned and forgotten excellence, a mellowness dating from the days of "The Wizard of Oz" and "The Prince of Pilsen," had made him unexpectedly the one marked member of the show. In his private life, as in his professional, his little angry eyes roamed restlessly for experience wherever they could absorb it.

Sitting now in Bellsmith's warm library, from the very wealth of the hangings, the great marble mantel, the books on the shelves, he was visibly expanding with an emotion reaching almost to inspiration.

Bellsmith himself, in fact, was feeling decidedly more secure when back in his own surroundings. With an air of genuine sociability he went to the dining-room and came back with a stout decanter at the sight of which the little Irishman's eyes began to sparkle.

"Well, well, well," he exclaimed, with the humorous twist of his mouth that he used on the stage. "Why feel poor, eh? when there's some of that left around? That's old-time stuff or else I'm a liar."

He was not a liar. He poured out a generous glass and sipped it with exquisite luxury, while Bellsmith brought cigars from a cabinet and sat down at the other side of the fire, which was now crackling merrily up through the kindlings.

Barnes watched the rising flames with that peculiarly

wistful expression with which men watch a camp-fire. He shook his head ruefully.

"Mr. Bellsmith! Mr. Bellsmith! You had all this and yet you wanted to go into the show business. What-ever possessed you?"

Bellsmith laughed. "Would you give up the show business to have it?"

The Irishman pondered. "Well, now, there's a question."

For minutes the two men sat there in silence, both loath, in their sudden comfort, to bring up the sorrowful question of the "Eleanor" company and its fate. Barnes, indeed, in this new atmosphere, seemed possessed by a sense of propriety which prevented him from mentioning it, and Bellsmith had to do it at last.

"And so, Mr. Barnes," he began, "you really think that if we can hold it together, 'Eleanor' could be made a go?"

Instantly the little comedian flashed up with the fire of the zealot. "I don't think it. I know it. It's never had a chance."

His enthusiasm was appealing, but even in his brief four days of experience Bellsmith had become cynical.

"Why has n't it been a success up to now?"

For answer the little Irishman threw out his hands in a gesture that expressed the hopelessness of a million things.

"Why?" he repeated. "Say, look here, Mr. Bellsmith. How would you run this house if there were eight different bosses, all in the same room, all having different ideas and all giving orders at once?"

"Was that what happened to 'Eleanor'?"

"Just look at it. Don't it show it? Eight different men, to my personal knowledge, had a hand in putting out 'Eleanor,' and none of those eight had ideas alike. There were both Harcourt and Gay, each butting in every day with some new bee that had struck their bonnet and putting in this and pulling out that. There was Fritz Melcher, who wrote the book, or at least his name was on it. Then there was Tony Gaylord, who wrote the score, or thought he was going to write it. Then there was Fred Lattimer, who was paid a thousand a week to produce it up to and including the first night. And then, when it didn't seem to go well in Atlantic City where it opened, the publishing house which had the rights to the music sent over Bus Williams to put in some interpolated songs, songs that would sell by themselves whether the show went or not. All the time we were in New York they kept that thing up. What the devil could *any* one get from that merry circus?"

Bellsmith asked listlessly, "Why did they do it?"

"Why?" snorted Barnes. "Because that's the way they're producing musical shows nowadays, and then they wonder why they don't have any more 'Pinafores' or 'Mikados.' When I first went into the business if a man put out a show, by George, he put it out! It was *his*! And it looked it. But nowadays what do they do? What *did* they do, as a matter of fact, when they put out 'Eleanor'? I'll tell you what they did. Wait a minute."

With an air indescribably comic Barnes interrupted himself and relit his cigar, closing one eye like a chicken,

from the top down instead of from the bottom up, to keep the smoke out of it. He blew out the match and leaned forward on the edge of his chair, full of business and very confidential.

"Listen!" he began, "Al Harcourt is no more of a showman than you are."

He had made an unexpected point, and Bellsmith laughed. The little comedian joined him mechanically.

"Well, anyway," he continued, "Al Harcourt is really a financial man, and a good one too if he'd stick to that end of it. Walter Gay is the producer of the firm but, like a dozen others, he's scared to death of anything new. If 'Uncle Tom's Cabin' was tied up so that no one else could produce it, Walter Gay would buy it tomorrow—and set it to music. I know he would. Do you know how Harcourt & Gay made their money?"

"No. Not exactly," replied Bellsmith, which meant that he did n't know at all.

"Well, I'll tell you how they did it," said Barnes. "Listen! They made it by playing safe every time, by letting the other fellow take all the chances. They brought out nothing that had n't been tried out by some one else. That meant foreign shows, mostly. They made their big money ten to fifteen years ago with 'The Princess Trix' and 'The Amber Whistle,' both Austrian shows, and then for five years they did n't produce one single new show—all stuff from Vienna. To them the show business was like you buying land—to keep other people from getting it first. They never wanted a thing until they found out that somebody else wanted it. You could have offered 'Chu Chin Chow'

to Harcourt & Gay in those days and they would n't have looked at it, if any one over here had written it. But send it over to London or Paris and play it a month and then they'd give a million dollars for it without ever seeing it."

"Just the same, that sounds like good business," suggested the chastened Bellsmith.

"Well, in a way, it was good business," admitted Barnes, "if that is your idea of the theater. But even as it was, the war put the kibosh on that and put it good. It left them flat with thousands of dollars advanced in Vienna for shows that they have n't got yet and never will get. So then what did they do? Well of course they tried to do the next best thing over here. Listen! They would find two boys like Melcher and Gaylord who had written the most successful shows of the year and say, 'Now here. You give us another just like that last one.' And that's what you've got in 'Eleanor' — just a cooked-over version of 'Betty.' And what was 'Betty'? Just a cooked-over version of 'Love Girl.' They never seem to get the idea that you can't ride one horse forever."

The little man was eager enough, but it all seemed very far from the point, and Bellsmith was only listening in a vague, dull weariness.

"Did you ever tell them that?" he suggested.

"Tell them, hell!" retorted the comedian hotly. "Who was I but a big fat 'ham' from the old-time circuit who ought to think himself lucky to be in the show at all without telling Walter Gay's little tin gods how to run it."

Bellsmith rose and filled the comedian's glass from the stout decanter. He turned, kicked the logs in the fire, and then filled his own glass more guardedly.

"Well, here's to you," he said.

"How!" responded the comedian.

Bellsmith took a closer seat by the fireplace and picking up the tongs began to poke idly at the gray coals which were already forming at the edge of the hearth. Again for a moment the two men sat in silence watching the flames roar with new life up the stamped iron throat of the old-fashioned chimney. The Lyceum Theater *did* begin to seem more or less of a far-away dream now. That is, to Bellsmith.

"Well," he suggested perfunctorily, "what would you have done with the show if you had had your say about it?"

"Anyway," snorted Barnes, "I would n't have done what *they* did with it. Mr. Bellsmith, you may not believe me, but there has never been a complete manuscript of 'Eleanor' since the day it was started. I'm telling you the truth."

Bellsmith had no reason to doubt it, but he felt constrained to ask, "What do you mean?"

"I mean just what I say. That's not a show. It's nothing but fifty thousand dollars' worth of scenery and costumes and twenty-five cents' worth of music and specialties."

Bellsmith smiled in the firelight. "Unfortunately that is only too true, but what are we going to do about it?"

Barnes did not reply. He sat staring into the flames,

his little seamed face distorting oddly. When he began again it was in a voice suddenly and completely subdued, a tone curiously childlike and appealing.

"Mr. Bellsmith, you know something about music?"

"A little."

"Don't you know a lot?"

"Why? Why do you ask?"

"Because I think that you do. Somebody told me."

Bellsmith looked back at the fire. Another vision had entered that conversation, and his attitude was answer enough for the little man opposite.

"Mr. Bellsmith," he pleaded gently, "would n't it give you a little pride to pull that show off the road for three or four weeks—just let it lie idle—until—well, damn it! until Miss Marshall gets better?"

Bellsmith did not move his eyes from the flames but the tongs moving idly in his hands became suddenly still.

"You don't mean give up altogether?"

"Oh, no!" cried Barnes. "Hold it together. Hold the company but just lie quiet until we can all get into better shape. We could rebuild the whole show in three or four weeks. Make it a thousand times better. Give up your booking, yes, but hold the organization just a little while longer. It wouldn't take much. Send us back to New York. Keep us right here in Leicester. You've got the value of thirty thousand dollars in costumes and sets. You can't want to throw that right into the fire. You've got a good organization. We can get some one to write in a first-class part for Miss Marshall. The one she's got is no good.

Then it will be all ready for her when she comes back. Just give us three or four weeks and some place to work, and I 'll guarantee to give you a show that you will be proud of."

Bellsmith did not reply, but Barnes knew that he was weakening.

"Mr. Bellsmith," he argued, "I don't know what all this fuss is about and it's none of my business but you can't tell me that a man like you could n't go out somewhere and lay his hands on four or five thousand dollars just to tide things over. Could n't you, now? Perhaps not to-night, but in a week maybe. Could n't you, now, Mr. Bellsmith?"

"I might," answered Bellsmith slowly.

The little comedian almost started out of his chair.

"Look here," he said. "I've got sixteen hundred dollars of my own salted away in New York. I could be back here with it by Monday night. If you 'll agree to stick I 'll pour in every damn cent of it."

Bellsmith smiled painfully. "I hardly think that will be necessary."

"But you don't get me," exclaimed Barnes. "I *want* to do it. That's how much I think of the show."

"But the people," suggested Bellsmith. "Would they be willing?"

"I think they would," replied Barnes, "that is, most of them, if you give 'em enough to live on and guarantee salaries sooner or later. Maida Maine we could n't hold, but we don't want her, anyway. Tommy Knight would do it. Bellony might or might not. I think the rest would be more than willing."

Bellsmith's only answer was silence while Barnes sat erect in his chair, his eyes on the other man like the eyes of a terrier watching a rat hole.

Suddenly both of them became aware of the dim sound of a telephone bell in the cloak-closet at the far end of the hall, aware that it had been ringing for some time without their hearing it. Bellsmith went out to answer.

In three or four minutes he returned, his face wearing a very curious expression.

"It was Israel's," he answered. "He's been talking to New York. Harcourt & Gay want to buy the show back again!"

Barnes looked at him unbelieving.

"Buy back the show?" he repeated.

Bellsmith nodded.

"To carry it on?" asked Barnes.

"He did n't say."

"How much did they offer? About five hundred dollars, I suppose."

"He did n't say that."

"Well, what are you going to do?"

"What do *you* want to do?" returned Bellsmith.

Barnes reflected; then slowly a smile broke over his face.

"Mr. Bellsmith, I'll stick if you will."

"All right," replied Bellsmith, "I'm sticking."

CHAPTER XXV

“**N**OW, this is *my* idea,” said Charlie Barnes earnestly. “You’ve got the girl in the garden but as yet you don’t know what you want to do with her. Do you see what I mean?”

He looked up. Bellsmith and Pete Surdam, sitting at opposite sides of the table, in Bellsmith’s library, nodded gravely. From the long windows the November sunlight flickered down, pale lemon in color, on the huge patterns of the old fashioned carpet. In the hall outside William pattered briskly to the front door, took in a circular from the Blue Method Laundry Co., and pattered back down the hall again.

Charlie Barnes tapped a very thin, very soiled budget of type-script which lay on the table before him, done up in blue legal covers. As he had pointed out on the previous Sunday evening, it was the nearest thing which had ever existed to a complete “book” of “Eleanor” and, little as it was, most of it had become obsolete before it had even been put in rehearsal. Beside it stood a very much higher pile of orchestral music in manuscript, each number separate in a loose brown folder. On the floor were stacked the original furnishings of Bellsmith’s library table: a Bagdad scarf in gilt threads, a small statuette from Pompeii, a brass paper-knife, a colossal edition of the “Divina Commedia” with steel

engravings after Gustave Doré, and a small green volume, "The Letters of John Quincy Adams," which had been put there by a casual house-maid in 1882 and had remained there by rigid precedent ever since.

"The trouble with this thing," insisted Barnes, tapping the thin blue book, "is that it really never gets anywhere. Now, in that garden scene, what we've got to do is to fasten some crime on Tommy Knight, something bad enough so that it will get him in Dutch with the girl and her people but not bad enough so that it will make him lose the sympathy of the audience, if you see what I mean. We don't want any old stuff, like this business of stealing the duchess's emeralds. We want to think up some new and original crime, something that might really get a decent chap into trouble."

"Shooting rail-birds at high tide," suggested Bell-smith, "or keeping hogs inside the city limits."

Surdam looked across the table with a grin, but Charlie Barnes did not even glance up. As already noted, Charlie Barnes had little use for humor outside of his profession.

"But look here, Charlie," proposed Surdam, "why not fasten that crime on *you*, instead of on Tommy? The way your part is now, you're supposed to be a pathetic, helpless old fool and nobody would blame you very much whatever you did. Then, since you're sort of an old retainer, Tommy could know you did it but he could be willing to take all the blame for it rather than squeal."

Barnes sat for a moment transfixed, making sure that the idea was valid before he accepted it.

"By George! I believe you're right," he said at last. "Now we've got the whole key to the story."

Surdam had a way of smiling faintly without really changing expression.

"And as to that," continued Surdam, "what we've got to do right now is get ahead with the numbers. You can dope out the plot and the comedy whenever you please. What I want is something that I can rehearse with those loafers down town. If we don't give them something to do pretty soon they'll get so soft they can't even dance. Not that they ever could anyway."

This cynical suggestion met with no response, and Surdam himself was obliged to continue with the business before the meeting.

"How many of Maida Maine's songs did you intend to give to Tilly Marshall? All of them?"

Barnes did not reply directly.

"When is Miss Marshall going to be able to work again?" he asked.

The form of the question showed that it was intended for Bellsmith and both men looked at him with a certain diplomatic hesitation. Bellsmith cleared his throat.

"The doctor won't give any direct answer," he replied, "but I think you can count on the middle of December."

"Does she know what's happened yet?"

Bellsmith shook his head. "Not unless the doctor has told her."

It did not seem a very promising state of affairs to Surdam, but both he and Barnes showed a certain delicacy by getting away from the subject swiftly. Both turned

to the blue book on the table with officious briskness. Yet the leading rôle of the piece could hardly be avoided indefinitely, and Surdam was forced to come back to it eventually.

"The trouble is," he said slowly, "that I frankly don't believe that Miss Marshall can sing all those songs."

He evidently decided to get the delicate subject over once and for all and turned squarely to Bellsmith.

"Do you—honestly?" he questioned.

Bellsmith looked down at the table and fingered the edges of the pile of music.

"No," he admitted, "I don't know that she can."

His answer seemed to take a certain weight off the minds of both of the others, and in an access of good nature Barnes hastened to fill in the gap.

"And I don't believe that she 'd want to, if she could," he added. "Look here."

With his hands held stiffly he began to measure off little equal distances on the table, like a man placing dominoes.

"Now, look here," he repeated, "the trouble with this whole show has been that all the numbers were just plunked down, one after the other, like a vaudeville or an olio. I've been lying awake nights over this thing. I did even before we busted. The trouble is that we've got about ninety-five more songs than we want, anyway. The way they are now they only just kill each other. The song numbers are like the book—all bla. What we want to do is to get one single song and hammer and

hammer and hammer it in—build up the whole show around it.”

Barnes turned professionally to Surdam, leaving Bellsmith out of it for the moment.

“You know the ‘Eve’ song?” he asked.

Surdam nodded.

“Well, Tilly—Miss Marshall—can sing *that* song all right.”

“Good song for her,” agreed Surdam.

Barnes turned and translated for Bellsmith. “Do you happen to remember a song ‘way at the end of the second act, ‘Ah, Women, All Daughters of Eve’?”

“I remember it very well,” replied Bellsmith. “It’s pretty.”

“Pretty?” snorted Barnes, outraged to the depths of his soul. “It’s a beauty! It’s a gem! Worked right, that song’s enough to make a show all by itself. But where is it now? It’s lost. It doesn’t come until people are putting on their hats and coats to go home. Nobody ever hears it.”

For added force Barnes began to tap the blue booklet. “Now there’s your song. Furthermore, it’s just the star song for Miss Marshall. A pure soubrette song, that is. It was never any song for Maida Maine, anyway. A great big amazon of a woman like her never had any business to sing it. Isn’t that so, Pete?”

Surdam nodded.

“Now here’s my dope,” said Barnes. “I want you to listen.”

For a long moment the little man sat absolutely mo-

tionless, his mouth puckered into a distorted little circle, his eyes fixed on the opposite wall. One finger began to tap softly on the table.

"First of all," he began, "that song ought to be played in the overture. That would get it into people's heads, and then when they first heard it in the show they'd have a vague idea that they'd heard it before. See? And that's the biggest pull any song can have.

"Then," continued Barnes, "that song should be played to introduce Tilly's entrance and she should come in singing it, so that whenever people see Tilly they'll think of that song and whenever they hear the song they'll think of Tilly. At her first entrance she'd sing it to Tommy, sort of leaning over and tantalizing and wistful—so! You understand that that's before they've had their quarrel. Everything is all honey.

"Then we can string that song along in the dances—octet and then the whole gang. Pound it in and pound it in and pound it in until the biggest blockhead in the whole house won't ever forget it. See what I mean?"

Surdam nodded, and even Bellsmith was becoming slowly fascinated by the crude structure which was beginning to form itself before his mind.

"Then they quarrel!" announced Barnes. "Tommy gets in disgrace. Regular quarrel. Never going to see each other again. Tilly pouts up her nose in the air. Tommy turns—all sorrowful. Going off to Australia or somewhere. Then slowly that same damn tune begins to creep up over the footlights again, and this time it is Tommy who stops, listens. Then he be-

gins to sing it, 'Ah, Women, All Daughters of Eve!'—sarcastic at first, then sad and drooping—so! He is n't to blame, but still he won't go back on his word. He's just reproachful. Sorrowful. Get me? So off goes Tommy, right in the middle of the song, still singing it, his voice growing farther and farther away in the distance.

"Then *bing!* The whole bunch comes on laughing and chattering: that's the way it is now, you remember. But I would n't leave it that way. Now, here's the joker. Here's the kick. I'd bring on the bunch all right and have Tilly mix around among them, laughing and gayer than all the rest, trying to fight down her tears. But *then!* instead of making that the curtain, as it is now, I'd shoot the whole bunch right off again—'We're all going to the Casino.' See?

"That would leave Tilly all alone in the little garden. You remember, Pete, at the end of that act there's a fine, mellow sunlight effect on the wall? And a row of hollyhocks and old-fashioned flowers down in front of it?

"Now, then! Tilly's all alone again—all the bunch gone—silence. End of the act is coming. Now she begins to think of Tommy. Wishes she had n't acted as she did. Then slowly up begins to creep a strain of that song again, thin as a needle. Of course it's really a muted violin, but it's supposed to be Tilly's thoughts—memories.

"She stops. She's sort of scared. Listens. Never moves a step. Stands there through one whole verse. Not a word. Not a note. Just droops her head. Then

slowly she picks up one single flower. Looks at it for a minute. Then slowly drops it again. And *there's* your curtain!"

The little man stopped abruptly, the tears glistening in his eyes, and Bellsmith himself was feeling rather queer. Opposite, Surdam was gazing fixedly at the table.

Barnes, however, was not nearly through.

"That's the first act," he announced. "Now the second act is evening. On the terrace. Outside the Casino. Ocean over there. But the way it is now it just starts right in. There they all are. Just happen to be there.

"Now," continued Barnes, "what I'd do would be this: Keep the terrace scene all right, just as it is—evening dresses, Japanese lanterns, all that sort of thing. But I'd bring in a little fragment of flower-garden on the terrace, just enough of it to give the idea and just enough of a wall to give a background, make you think of the first act. See? Furthermore, I would n't have it really evening at the start but just the last end of sunset—pink in the sky—just getting dark. Understand? Costumes just the same, people all dressed for the ball, coming in and out of the garden. Then right away it grows darker and darker, moonlight, Japanese lanterns, and so on."

Surdam was about to speak but Barnes held up his hand.

"Wait a minute," he commanded. "Wait till I tell you what I've got in mind."

Surdam obeyed and Barnes continued.

"Now you remember," he said, "that the end of the first act was just that thin thread of music and Tilly standing before the wall. She'd dropped a flower. Between that and the second act we've got to think of the entr'acte music. All they do now is just play an arrangement of all the first act songs which run over into the second. I'd can that. Can it completely. Can 'em all. Just keep that one big song, 'Ah, Women, All Daughters of Eve.'

"In the music of the entr'acte, I'd pick up that air from just where it was dropped at the first curtain. Build up the whole entr'acte around it just like an opera. Start first with little, quavering, distant violin notes, pick up one instrument after another—always that song. Play it in three or four keys, play it in half a dozen different ways, building up one on the other. Toy with it. Throw it and catch it like a ball. Have the strings play it, then the wood winds, then maybe even the drums and trombones, booming it out. Play it first soft and wistful, then faster and mocking. Then play it stiff and funny, almost like a stiffllegged jig. Then have two sets of instruments play it against each other, almost in discord. Then back to slow and wistful, just a thin thread again. Then Pete, up goes your curtain and there's Tilly again, standing before a wall. But, this time, she stoops and picks up a flower—get me?—and as she holds it and keeps it the same faint music begins to rise up, growing up stronger and stronger. Then, of course, the act goes on."

Barnes stopped proudly and looked around in happy

defiance, but neither of the others had a word to say.

"That 's good dope, Charlie," commented Surdam at last, "but is n't there anybody in this show except Tilly Marshall?"

Barnes laughed curtly. "Don't you worry about that. Tommy 's provided for, and I always write most of my own stuff, anyway. So far as I 'm concerned you 've got the idea. I 'm the old goop that Tommy gets into trouble for, the old gardener or something. But I can tell you this, Pete, that I 'm not going to play it the way I 've had to play my old part in 'Eleanor.' There ought to be pathos in that part of mine, and, now that there 's no Walter Gay to kick me in the pants, it 's pathos I 'm going to get out of it."

But the little man never lost sight of his original issue. He turned to Bellsmith.

"Say, Mr. Bellsmith, do you think you could play over that 'Eve' song? I want Pete to listen to something. You need n't bother whether you get it just right or not. Just the air is all I want to show him."

Bellsmith had almost acquired Surdam's trick of smiling without showing it.

"I think so," he said.

He sorted through the tall stack of orchestral music, drew out a violin part, glanced through it swiftly, then, discarding it, took the conductor's score. Surdam watched him with a sudden surprised interest, but when Bellsmith rose and went to the grand piano in the drawing-room he made no move to follow. Lighting a cigarette, the stage-manager was content to put his feet on the table and gaze luxuriously around the big library.

Pete Surdam found consolation in life, no matter for whom he was working.

Charlie Barnes, for his part, could never endure the idea of being anywhere except at the very center of operations. He followed at Bellsmith's heels like a fretting little terrier, and as Bellsmith sat down and spread out the score he stood two inches behind him, breathing heavily on his neck, hoping, no doubt to encourage him.

At the first rich, easy arpeggio, however, on what really was one of the finest pianos ever built in America, Bellsmith was aware that even Surdam was stirring out of his lethargy in the other room, and a moment later he came in to join them.

The whole song was entirely in the strings at the bottom of the page, the other parts being little more than vamping. It was simple enough to see four straight parts, but as he went on into a second chorus Bellsmith found a mild amusement in doing a little borrowing. He ended on a new finale of his own, and then turned to where Barnes and Surdam were now sitting on yellow silk chairs at opposite sides of the long room. The two men were looking at each other with very odd expressions.

The comedian turned to Bellsmith. "Say, mister!" he exclaimed, "nobody's got very much to teach you, have they?"

Bellsmith looked down and began to run over the keys. There is no use of saying that he did n't like it.

Barnes turned back to Surdam. "Now, Pete, see what I mean? Could n't that song be a winner?"

Surdam nodded non-committally, but Barnes, determined not to let enthusiasm die, called over to Bellsmith.

"Say, Mr. Bellsmith, could n't you play that song again and do monkey-shines with it?"

Bellsmith had heard worse names for improvisation. He turned willingly enough to the keyboard, and indeed he needed no better chart for a rough symphonic scheme than that which Barnes had already given him. He whipped off a crashing and formal introduction, then gradually worked into a broad synoptic suggestion of the little air. Then with augmenting progressions he sketched out a clearer and clearer tone picture of the air itself, building it up and up with balanced, contrasted treatments to a powerful leaping finale based on his own introduction. He stopped completely then hastily remembered Barnes's own idea for the second act curtain. With one hand he drew out a little thin thread of the simple air, leaving it suspended and expectant.

"Is that what you mean?" he asked.

He turned, and the little comedian breathed a huge sigh.

"George! that's fine!" he exclaimed. "It's got me all excited. Now I want to get to work on my own part. George! Mr. Bellsmith, I wish there was such a thing as comedian music!"

Bellsmith smiled. "Well, maybe there is."

He sat a minute ruminating over the keyboard; then turned again.

"I have a large idea," he announced.

As Surdam and Barnes watched him with curious interest he stood up and, reaching over into the instru-

ment, lightly muted the lowest E, A, and D strings with the tips of his fingers. When the keys were struck it made them sound amazingly like a bass viol, pizzicato. With his left hand still muting the strings, Bellsmith played sketchily the idea which had been lingering in his mind, for a week, of "The Policeman's Sonata":

"Thrump, thrump, thrump, thrump.
Thrum-a thrum-a thrump, thrump."

With his fingers still on the strings, Bellsmith looked over his shoulder to Barnes.

"What does that sound like?" he asked.

Barnes grinned. "George! it sounds like *me!*"

Excitedly he rose to his feet and began a funny little bow-legged walk, while Bellsmith played through the sketch again.

"That can be your motif," he remarked. "One could work that into the overture too. Play it every time you made an entrance."

"It's a man with a wooden leg!" shouted Barnes gleefully. "I've got it! I've got it!"

"Yes, but we ought to have something to play against you," said Bellsmith.

He sat down again, and as he worked into quaint little trills in upper octaves, the querulous tenor picture of William began to form itself in the music, playing back and forth against the bass policeman. It was William then and for some time after, but eventually this upper part, on squealing clarinets, became the motif for

Celestine Trip, the heavy woman, in the part of the badgering, hectoring, wealthy old duchess, the employer of the pathetic, comic gardener, always pursuing him but never quite catching him.

"Wonderful! Wonderful!" applauded Barnes. "Say, Mr. Bellsmith, if we got Jake Ziegler, the leader of the orchestra, up here to help you, do you think you could write that down?"

"I think so," admitted Bellsmith, "and if he won't there is a kindly old gentleman in town who will."

"In the meantime," suggested Surdam, "let's get back to that book and decide on just what numbers we're going to leave in and what we're going to leave out."

With a sense of glory enough for the afternoon Bellsmith followed him into the library, but Barnes remained behind at the piano, trying to pick out "The Policeman's Sonata" with one stubby forefinger. It was not very successful.

Surdam, the stage-manager, apparently had two voices and two manners, one, rather non-committal, which he used when any of his company were present and one, more frank and informal, into which he dropped whenever they were not. He relaxed immediately into this more informal tone as Bellsmith and he sat down again at the library table. He nodded toward the tall pile of scores.

"Mr. Bellsmith, what do you think of that music, anyway?"

Bellsmith did not reply for a moment. He had the usual fear of seeming pedantic. Very much as Barnes

had done with the blue book, he ruffled the edges of the scores.

"Well," he confessed at last, "the chief thing that's the matter with all this is that *nothing's* the matter with it. So much of it sounds as if it had been taken out of Czerny's studies and put into ragtime."

The stage-manager grinned. "Well, you're not so far away from the truth at that."

Encouraged, Bellsmith went on, still looking down at the table.

"Music like that has always been a puzzle to me. There's only one number in that whole score that isn't written in four-four time or two-four, and that's in rapid six-eight. Fundamentally there's nothing but marches. Why can't they shake them up? Why don't they mix their speeds, so to speak? Why not a waltz or two, or some other song rhythm?"

Surdam lit a fresh cigarette and blew the smoke at the ceiling. "Oh, that's their idea," he said. "They say waltzes are dead. They believe that every song must be one you can twist into a fox-trot. I suppose in the end we'll have to play safe just as they do."

But a certain vigor had come into Bellsmith during the last few minutes, as it had into Barnes.

"Look here," he commanded, borrowing what was apparently the company's password. "This music was made deliberately rotten to draw the public, and it failed to draw them. The show can't fail very much worse if we make it good."

"That same idea," drawled Surdam, "was just creeping over me. But you are the one who is risking the

money. Heaven knows *I* don't put out stupid shows just for the fun of it."

"Well," said Bellsmith, "one might as well be hanged for a sheep as a lamb. Go ahead. We 'll do as we jolly well please, then see what happens."

...

CHAPTER XXVI

THIS conference, of which the finest flower had been the "Eve song" and "The Policeman's Sonata," had taken place on the Wednesday after what was now called, without reservation, the "bust-up" of the "Eleanor" show; but it might have taken place on any other day of that week or almost any day of the week following.

To Bellsmith it had been a source of amazement to find how simply the company did actually settle into its altered status. Like most persons unaccustomed to trouble, he had fully looked for the end of the world after Saturday night. Rising, the next morning, from a tossing five hours in bed, he had had a strong inclination not even to shave. From personal humiliation one can frequently understand the drift toward sackcloth and ashes. The sound of Annie running the vacuum-cleaner in the upper halls had seemed to Bellsmith distinctly a false note, one unpleasantly out of key with the sense of abasement made fitting by the occasion.

When, however, he had discovered that the lemon-colored sun really had risen in the east and that outside the windows the crowds on Main Street were gabbling along to nine o'clock mass or hurrying sternly home with their Sunday papers, it had begun to dawn on him that the world might still go on after all and that he

himself might still take some small part in it. After coffee and marmalade (and, on better judgment, the shave) he had even begun to feel brisk and ambitious.

There had been one relieving feature of the morning—that he himself had not been obliged to attend that eleven o'clock assembly at the Lyceum Theater when the news was broken to the members of the company. That had been agreed upon the previous evening.

"You leave 'em to me," Barnes had insisted. "You leave 'em to me. I know that bunch like a book, and they 'll do whatever I tell 'em."

Wholly regardless of the nature of the news which he had to impart, the barrack lawyer in Barnes had quite looked forward to appearing before his associates, clothed at last in actual authority. After that conference it would be difficult to believe that Barnes had not deliberately brought about the wreck of the "Eleanor" show in order to reorganize it on his own finer suggestions.

Bellsmith's part had been to see Dr. MacVickar the first thing on Monday morning and ascertain whether or not he could be assured of five thousand dollars from some source which would not require the pledging of any of his property held up by the Pilgrim Trust Co.

It cannot be truthfully said that Dr. MacVickar had felt any great sense of risk in agreeing, if necessary, to pledge all the property he had in the world, reserving, of course, his stethoscope and the little round plate that he sometimes wore on his forehead to peer into people's tonsils.

"Since I got you into this mess," he declared, "I sup-

pose that I have got to get you out of it, or, rather, get you in still deeper, which has been my purpose from the first."

"Just the same," added the doctor, "it all shows the uncertainty of human affairs. Here I was relying on your case to give me a trip to the Continent."

Then, as frequently happened, a certain professional instinct froze him up sharply and he added: "Now, for heaven's sake, please don't ever repeat that remark even as a joke. The world does not understand jokes, and a physician is hedged about with far more restrictions than a clergyman."

Bellsmith also took the occasion of this call to ask details about Tilly Marshall but again a professional code had seized upon Dr. MacVickar.

"Young man," he admonished, "there are certain sides of my practice which must always remain a closed book to you. Just because your own case proved to be so much of an afternoon tea-party you must n't suppose that a nerve specialist does not sometimes have to dabble pretty deep in the human frame. If you must, look up 'neurosis' and 'psychosis' in your encyclopedia when you get home. Miss Marshall is an instance of the one and you are an instance of the other. If things had gone on as they were, two or three weeks longer, Miss Marshall would have been a very sick little girl."

Bellsmith had, however, drawn out the envelope which had been given him on the preceding Saturday evening by Israels and explained its contents. Dr. MacVicker undertook its transmission willingly enough.

"And if," added Bellsmith, rather shame-faced,

"there are to be more of these, it can be understood that the company is still in active existence!"

"Oh, quite!" replied Dr. MacVickar.

The adjustment of the "Eleanor" company itself had worked out in a manner, very similar to that of Tommy Knight's birthday party—by a process of natural selection.

As Barnes had prophesied, Maida Maine, the prima donna, approached in private conference on Sunday morning, had listened to the new proposal with high scorn and hot indignation. It had never been even necessary to hint that there was a plan to give her part to Tilly Marshall. Remain in a "fit-up" company, owned by an amateur, controlled largely by Charlie Barnes! She should say *not*! She had left for New York by the noon train, maid, sables, and diamonds.

Poor Maida Maine! By the bitterness of ironical fate she was destined to be the only member of the company who would suffer greatly by the collapse of the "Eleanor" show which, above all others, she was so perfectly willing to abandon.

Honest and decent enough but handsome merely in the sense that she was imposing, Maida Maine was one of those many women on the American stage who have been touted into a factitious fame for which there never seems to be any real explanation. In her case there was little more than the reputation for a "magnificent figure." It would be difficult to imagine a more hideous way in which to be famous, but Maida Maine took it with profound solemnity. Almost every one in the theatrical world knew that for years she had been professionally

"slipping," but none of this had ever pierced the barriers of her own dull complacency. She literally believed that her every move was as diligently watched by the public as the moves of a cabinet minister. She had no idea but that on her return to New York she would only have to announce her presence to almost any producer in order to be sent out at the head of some new enterprise built up around her "personality." There is one happy thing that can be said about Maida Maine; in her prosperous years she had fortunately saved a good deal of money.

Tony Bellony would probably have stayed if he had been urged very hard, but he was not urged. Ugly truth must occasionally creep out between the lines of this good-natured narrative. As Bellsmith was likely to say almost any time now, *Historia scribitur ad narrandum, non ad probandum*, and the truth was that Charlie Barnes was not eager to have any other man in the cast ahead of him. One can hardly blame him. In twenty-seven years of rebuff he had certainly earned the right to do a little rebuffing.

In this case, fortunately, there was no real tragedy. Tony Bellony had for years been floating about the theatrical world much like a walrus in a tank, never exerting the slightest effort, never getting very far, but always keeping his head above water. If he had ever probed his own emotions, he would probably have admitted that he did not care very much for musical comedy, anyway. It was very distressing for him to have to learn lines and much more distressing to have to say them. Speaking parts he had always regarded as

an unnecessary feature of the theater. On leaving the "Eleanor" company he went immediately back into "big time" vaudeville, where, appearing in evening clothes and singing sentimental ballads exactly suited to his bleating tenor, he had already accumulated a large and lacrymose following.

The loss of these two stars reduced the weekly pay roll of the "Eleanor" company by the sum of five hundred and fifty dollars a week, a fact which had been foreseen by Charlie Barnes much more vividly than by Bellsmith, who had merely regarded the two as artistic nuisances. It also reduced the principals to a much more tractable body. "A cozy mixed foursome and one in the bye," as Bellsmith suggested, for in the new "Eleanor," as in the old, Elsie Winner figured largely as a simple Nerissa and Celestine Trip played her part of the hectoring duchess almost unaltered.

Of all those who remained, the case of Israels was the most inexplicable, for he had had complete intentions of leaving the show from the very first minute that Bellsmith had taken it over; but when that same show had moved from merely potential failure to actual collapse, he suddenly decided to stand by the ship. It would be interesting to know his actual reasons. Charlie Barnes had his own suspicions, but events completely disproved them. One must be fairer to Israels than that for, as the hard days of reorganization went on, the show had no more willing henchman.

It was curious, though, to watch the slow transition in Israels's point of view from that of a representative of Harcourt & Gay to that of an independent ally of Bell-

smith. When he came up to Bellsmith's house on the first Sunday he was still wholly the former.

"Well, Mr. Bellsmith," he said, "so you 're still sticking."

Bellsmith nodded. He knew well enough that Israels had not come primarily to discuss the reorganization of "Eleanor."

The manager rubbed his hands and looked around the room in order to allow the proper interval for an important proposal.

"Mr. Bellsmith," he said, "I 've had another talk on the wire with Harcourt & Gay this morning. They 'll give you ten thousand dollars—take the show right off your hands to-morrow."

Bellsmith shook his head. His own point of view had changed since talking, an hour before, with Charlie Barnes, and also since eating marmalade. At certain hours on the previous evening he would have been glad enough if any one had offered to take the show off his hands for nothing, but now ten thousand dollars for all his worries seemed contemptibly miserable.

"Fifteen?" suggested Israels, but he himself knew that it was a tactical error.

By the middle of the week the change in his point of view had already set in. He called Bellsmith aside during one of the morning rehearsals that had begun again at the Lyceum Theater.

"Mr. Bellsmith," he said, very confidentially, "Harcourt & Gay are trying to get me to see you again about buying back the show. I think they 're beginning to understand now that it is n't so easy. They 're throw-

ing out hints about twenty thousand—perhaps twenty-five.”

The last week before the show finally started out on the road again he came to Bellsmith in contemptuous glee.

“Mr. Bellsmith,” he said, “they want to know if we ’d talk to a guy if they sent him up from New York. Fellow named Williams. I know him.”

He winked both eyes at once. “They didn’t say much, but I’ve got a good hunch that, if they had to, they ’d give us back every cent we put into it. I told them ‘nothing doing!’”

For, as the days and the weeks went on, even Charlie Barnes became convinced that Israels knew no more than he or Bellsmith did of what lay behind these mysterious proposals. There could be no question at all that Harcourt & Gay had been delighted at the original chance to unload. What had happened since? What could have happened since? There was nothing even in Charlie Barnes’s experience that could tell them. They were to remain for some months unenlightened, for with Israels’s last ultimatum the proposals terminated abruptly.

For the first three days of its vacation in Leicester, the “Eleanor” show was virtually at a standstill. What work was done was done by Israels. With the ease which he had promised, he canceled the booking and made arrangements to store the properties in the Lyceum. On Tuesday or Wednesday, convinced that Bellsmith was really in earnest, he took off his coat and reduced the mechanical force to a skeleton organization.

Nothing that Israels was ever to do impressed Bellsmith so deeply as did his complete nonchalance in discharging people. In the whole history of the Bellsmith family probably not more than three employees had ever been actually discharged, and the memories of those three occasions had lurked in the household like unhappy nightmares. With Israels it was entirely different.

"Ike," he said one morning to one of the electricians. "I guess you 'd better get through to-morrow."

The man looked up with a nonchalance as complete as his own. "I get until Saturday night, don't I?"

"Oh, yes," said Israels, "we 'll give you that, but there 's no use your hanging around any longer."

Pending reorganization, the chorus people were promised full pay and simply turned out to pasture. For two or three days vague, wandering groups of them flooded the parks and sidewalks of the city. One of the stage-hands even entered deeply enough into Leicester life to get himself arrested, but after the first faint novelty of the thing the wealthiest of them began to take surreptitious trips to New York. The rest celebrated their release from theatrical grind by spending all their time in the theater.

The actual plan on which the show was revised proved eventually to be very much the one first outlined by Charlie Barnes. Crude and in parts ridiculous, nevertheless in general form it remained remarkably unsailable. But, having once given voice to his great inspiration, poor Charlie Barnes, in a curious and sudden relapse, became, for creative purposes, absolutely worthless. It may really be that every man has one story

locked up in his heart. It may be that, in his fury for saving the last great chance of his life, the little clown had been propelled beyond the pinnacle of his normal intelligence, but the fact remained that after that one big burst his daily suggestions became increasingly hackneyed and puerile. Happily the original inspiration had been caught and pinned down, and as it took shape in mellow hands it was not in Charlie Barnes to realize that it was not still entirely his own conception.

In Jake Ziegler, the leader of the orchestra, Charlie Barnes had a curious parallel. Ziegler was a willing and friendly little Austrian with the appearance of a waiter and very much the manners of one. Like most conductors of theater orchestras he had, at first sight, a marvelous musical training, which, however, wore thin or stopped short at the most incredible moments. It was not that, like Charlie Barnes, he was unschooled in the classics of his profession. He had passed through the *conservatoire* in his own country, but the process had apparently left him untouched by one atom of musical imagination. There is something startling in this suggestion, for while we expect a boy to go through college without learning a thing we always take it for granted that when a man has passed through a "conservatory" he knows all that there is to know about music.

Pitch and tempo were Ziegler's sole concentrations. From his conductor's desk he could read absolutely anything at sight, but unless he had heard it first he could read nothing with the faintest conception of its real intention. On the other hand, once shown (and most delightfully amazed at what had been revealed to him), he

could conduct it a thousand times in spirited repetition, just faintly lacking the one touch of comprehension needed to make it intellectual. This was hardly the man who could be of much help in arranging a fantastic and highly facetious score. In the end the kindly old gentleman who had given Bellsmith his first lessons in harmony did it, and, as his theatrical experience progressed, Bellsmith, for his part, grew to have less and less faith in the theater's mute, inglorious Paganinis.

Surdam, lazy, indifferent Pete Surdam, was the real bulwark of that reorganization, for if the collapse of "Eleanor" had marked the end of Maida Maine's career, that same collapse had dynamited Pete Surdam into his great opportunity. Drifting along, half contemptuous of his work and yet too indifferent to seek any other, the bizarre conditions of the new "Eleanor" company were just sufficient to form the bridge between what he had always been content to do and what he had always dreamed of doing. Surdam's nominal superior had been absent from the company at the time of Bellsmith's purchase. He had been one of Harcourt & Gay's right-hand men, directing two shows at once. There had never been a question of his coming back, and the reorganization had fallen directly on Surdam's shoulders.

To Bellsmith it was fascinating to watch him at work, for if "Eleanor" had previously had little manuscript, in Pete Surdam's hands the book became of less importance than ever. Surdam was an artist who worked in large chunks, pulling things out and putting them in

by handfuls. To Barnes, to Ziegler, and indeed to the whole company he talked in code: "Jake, all that stuff in the third verse is out entirely. Run it in after the second encore." "Now, people, business of looking over the wall. Ready, Elsie. 'O girls, where is my father?'"

For Bellsmith, however, there began to come up another matter more pressing than watching rehearsals. Saturday night was pay night and it was not his intention to draw on the doctor's funds unless absolutely necessary. In Israel's proposals from New York, the amused young lawyer whom Bellsmith had engaged to fight his battle for freedom began to see an interesting new angle.

"It seems to me," he remarked one day, "that if that firm in New York is so anxious to buy your show back you ought not to have much difficulty in persuading the court that you used your funds with a good deal of wisdom."

The attorney also made a suggestion which, on the day before the hearing, Bellsmith passed on to Dr. MacVickar.

"Doctor, if this thing actually comes to trial, my lawyer suggests that you go on the stand as an alienist. You could certainly swear that at the time of my riotous and profligate acts I was under your care and that you knew me to be in a sound mental condition."

But the doctor shook his head.

"No," he replied, "it would hardly be wise to inform the court that you were even under observation by an alienist. Also, if I should testify on your side, the

other side would simply bring in another alienist to swear that you were a blithering idiot. Wise men in my trade don't care very much to go before the courts in these days. Three expert alienists on each side, one lot swearing black and one swearing white: that seems to be the usual court procedure."

The doctor looked at his patient thoughtfully.

"And as to that," he added, "I don't think that you're going to have a great deal of trouble. Even a doctor can do a little inquiring around. I should be very much surprised if by to-morrow night you could not spend all the money you want."

The doctor was right. About four o'clock the next day the court reporter appeared in the "Courier" office.

"That injunction against young Bellsmith," he announced to the city editor. "It's been dissolved at the motion of the trust company. What shall I do? Play it up for half a column?"

The city editor looked indifferently up from his desk.

"Oh, no," he replied. "Throw it out. Young Bellsmith has played fair with us. He's a good scout. We'll let him alone for a while until we can run down that tip that he's going to marry Miss What's-her-name—Tilly Marshall."

CHAPTER XXVII

FROM the outside, Stoneywood Sanatorium looked like a charming little country-house. Inside the front door one became conscious instantly of rubber matting and carbolic. Why do they do it?

No one had answered Bellsmith's ring and, opening the front door, he found no one in the long vacant hallway. At the right was a little office, absolutely bare, with white plaster walls. One felt that there should have been a crucifix there and a bad portrait of a good bishop. So felt Bellsmith, at least, in vague recollection of some similar room.

He coughed, shuffled furtively, and then walked to the window. Outside, Keefe, standing beside the car, was watching with the keenest interest an English starling hopping across the lawn, both tiny feet moving together. A gardener went by with a barrowfull of earth for a greenhouse but no one paid any attention to Bellsmith.

He decided to explore. Farther down the hall appeared a sitting-room furnished in chintz and seeming doubly luxurious by contrast with the bare hallways. A nurse in stiff white was writing at a little desk. The chief occupation of nurses was apparently writing. She did not look up, and Bellsmith cleared his throat timidly.

"I beg your pardon. Could I see Miss Tilly Marshall?"

The nurse did not even look up at that.

"Second floor front," she replied; "the room at the end of the hall."

And so that was all there was to a Sanatorium! Bellsmith had expected at least to be searched and disinfected.

Embarrassed, he padded up the rubber matting on the stairs and passed by a row of bedrooms, all with doors wide open. In one a woman in a kimono was manicuring her finger nails. In another a man was stirring under white sheets and coughing. Then suddenly he heard a voice hail him jovially: "Hello, Nero!" and there, sitting in bed, laughing at him, was Tilly Marshall.

Bellsmith hesitated at the doorway and looked around furtively.

"Do I come in?" he asked. "Ought there not to be a corps of nurses flanking me on either side?"

The girl laughed. "Goodness, no! Hundreds of people are in and out all day. The gardener spent an hour here this morning. His wife is a handsome, large woman, he says, but spends too much on her clothes."

As Bellsmith advanced into the room she drew a long breath. "Um! You smell of outside!"

Still stiffly, however, Bellsmith advanced slowly to the bedside and stood there awkwardly for a moment, while the girl watched him with eyes growing wider and wider.

"Are n't you going to kiss me?" she demanded in astonishment.

The idea had never occurred to him, but to the girl there had never occurred any other. As he leaned over the pillow both her thin little arms reached quickly up and pulled him down hard, and she kissed him violently—twice.

"There!" she exclaimed, releasing him, "I did most of the kissing, but it's been done anyway."

But Bellsmith was rather bewildered. Again, there is no use in saying that sharp thrills had not run all through him, but in the act itself his principal impression had been a bewildered one of his hand pressing through a crepe negligée on very thin, childish shoulder-blades, and of masses of fluffy hair in his eyes.

Then a softer mood came over the girl and she looked at him in a gentler way. "I should n't have done that, dear thing, but I was keyed up to being impulsive. Remember, I have n't seen you for nearly two weeks—and we're both anemic.

"Take off your coat," she commanded in the same breath. "You'll roast in here. Then sit down and tell me about things. What's going on at the jute-mill?"

As Bellsmith took off his overcoat he drew a small package from the pocket.

"I've brought you a few simple gauds," he explained. "I hope you'll accept them."

As she took the package from his hand the girl looked up at him searchingly; then as she opened it, she exclaimed in delight, "O you sweetheart!"

It was a little platinum bracelet that he had brought her. He had fought mentally over it for hours and then

decided that, with her, the simplest thing was always the safest. Impulsively she reached toward him, then drew back sharply.

"No," she said, "I won't kiss you this time, because I don't think you like it very much, and those things have to be done with a certain abandon."

As she slipped the bracelet on her arm and turned it back and forth, Bellsmith gazed curiously around the room. On the dressing-table in a silver frame was a photograph of a frail, pretty woman with bangs, rather English in appearance. He knew that it must be her mother. There were also Miss Marshall's brushes and comb scattered rather in confusion. He wondered why they gave him no particular sense of alarming intimacy.

Taking her eyes from the bracelet, the girl saw that there was some odd query in his mind and demanded instantly:

"What are you thinking about? Don't try to fool me."

"I was wondering," confessed Bellsmith, "why it did n't seem stranger to me to be here."

"I wish I knew that," answered the girl. "I can see that it does n't. I suppose that I ought to want you to be all tingly and nervous but I don't know that I do."

"It is n't that so much," said Bellsmith. "What amazes me is that it seems so accepted and natural."

But the answer did not quite satisfy the girl. She looked toward the window rather unhappily.

"I suppose that it might also mean that you don't care for me at all, that you 're just coming to see me as you might any charity patient."

Bellsmith had followed her gaze toward the window. Keefe and the gardener together had moved farther out on the lawn and stood, with hands on their hips, watching a group of birds clustered around some seeds which the gardener had thrown them. Keefe would probably have much to tell William that night about English starlings.

Bellsmith moved nervously and cleared his throat, but the girl turned her head on the pillow and held her hand toward him.

"Now, here," she commanded, "not a word. Just because I love you and don't mind letting you know it, you mustn't think that you've got to feel that way, too."

"But—" began Bellsmith.

"Now, stop!" commanded the girl. "Stop it at once. I know the signs, and you don't really care the way I do."

Gently Bellsmith took the hand held toward him on the coverlet.

"Now, please—" he insisted, but the girl would have none of it.

"Don't say it," she commanded, "because I know that you don't mean it. It wouldn't be fair, and I don't even think I want it.

"Don't worry," she added, a moment later. "If you ever do care as I do, I'll know it fast enough.

"And now!" she demanded drawing her hand away sharply. "Come! Quick! It's time for another anticlimax!"

Bellsmith laughed rather gruffly. "I only know that

same one. I've been wondering for days what to call you when I saw you. I'm sorry, but 'Tilly' is something I can never say without loathing."

"I know it," agreed the girl. "I suppose I don't mind it myself because I'm used to it. Would 'Helen' be any better?"

Bellsmith shook his head. "Rather worse, if anything. You don't look like a Helen."

Miss Marshall deliberated. "'Snoodles' or 'Doodles' would never do. I tell you. Why can't you call me 'Simon'?"

"Any particular reason?" asked Bellsmith.

"None at all," said the girl. "That's why I thought it might appeal to you."

"But yet," she added, "searching history, don't we come across a Simon? Simon of Athens?"

"Timon," corrected Bellsmith. "But still, to give you good standing, one could find several Simons. Simon de Montfort. Then there was Simon of Cyrene. Sentimental tradition, used for campaign purposes, tries to believe that he was a colored man. Personally I don't think he was."

Miss Marshall was looking at him, laughing.

"The learning," she said, "stored up in that one little brain!"

She changed her tone. "Never mind. I like facts, too. Let's have more of him. Possibly I'd like to be Simon. Just tell me roughly. What did he do? What made him famous?"

"He carried the cross," replied Bellsmith.

The girl looked down at the coverlet.

"Oh," she said, simply.

Bellsmith stirred quickly. "Now I think it's ^{low} ~~but~~ time for more anticlimax—in the other direction. What's the opposite of 'anticlimax'? 'pro-climax'? Let's see. I'll give you a name. How about—how about—how about—?"

The girl interrupted him. "Oh, dear!" she said. "You took so long I thought you were at it again and were going to give me your own name. Well, what do you suggest?"

"You've taken the wind out of my sails completely," answered Bellsmith. "I think that now I'm getting accustomed to 'Tilly.'"

Rather reverently he raised her hand to his lips and kissed it.

"That's better!" said the girl. "I can almost believe that you meant it, that time."

"So then it's decided," she asked, "that my name is 'Tilly'?"

"In the opinion of the chair, the Tillys have it," acknowledged Bellsmith.

And apparently the girl was quite genuine as she changed the subject.

"Tell me," she repeated, "what's happened to the company?"

Bellsmith did not answer at once.

"It's still in Leicester," he said finally.

The girl did not seem surprised. She looked toward the window, rather troubled. On the lawn outside, Keefe and the gardener were now taking leave of each other in hearty, ceremonious fashion.

"I knew that something of that kind had happened," continued Tilly. "Dr. MacVickar tried to tell me that they were out in Detroit or somewhere playing to crowded houses, but from two or three things he let slip I knew that they had n't left town."

She turned quietly toward Bellsmith. "What happened? Busted?"

"No," said Bellsmith, "the show is being entirely—what do you call it?—done over?—renovated? We're going to hold it in Leicester until you come back. We have decided to make you a prima donna."

The girl asked for no explanations. Her face merely clouded.

"Oh, why in the world did you do that?" she demanded. From her tone he might merely have said, "I've brought you a box of grapefruit."

"You're not giving me Maida Maine's part?" she asked a moment later, more thoroughly frightened. "I haven't got the voice. I could never do it under the sun."

Bellsmith told her, however, very much what had taken place. He himself had become, by contagion, an enthusiast over the new form of the show and, as he described it, Tilly Marshall began to see it as it had first taken shape before his own eyes. Some of Charlie Barnes's own vividness still clung to his description.

"That 'Eve' song," she admitted, "was the one song in the show that I wanted to sing. Charlie Barnes must have known that." Her eyes misted a little. "Dear old soul! I wonder how much he *was* thinking of me when he planned that all out."

Bellsmith laughed. "I don't think that you need to worry a great deal about Charlie Barnes. His own part in the show has not exactly suffered by this deal."

He paused, then added, "I don't know, but Surdam and I have a horrible fear that Charles Barnes has his heart set on singing a barytone solo in the second act—a serious solo. Surdam says that that's every comedian's one incurable obsession."

But apparently Stoneywood Sanatorium did really have an organization after all, for a nurse appeared cautiously at the door and tapped gently with the ends of her fingers.

"I'm sorry," she said, "but Dr. MacVickar gave orders—"

Bellsmith rose immediately and began putting on his coat. Then while the nurse stood decorously outside the door, he leaned over the pillow and again the thin arms drew him down.

Tilly Marshall listened while his feet clicked down the brass guards on the rubber-shod stairs. Then, from her window, she could see Keefe, on the lawn, give a respectful start and come running toward the car.

She heard the engine start with a low velvety hum and watched the car disappearing along the curving drive at the edge of the lawn. As it turned out into the country road and was lost from sight, the girl drew her knees up under the covers and, putting her head down on them, she began to pray silently, prayed to a Deity whom she had never visualized, One whose jurisdiction, in her life, was more often social or economic than

purely spiritual, One whom she sometimes did not even call by Name:

“Forgive me for what I am doing, but oh, I do love him so!”

The nurse, lingering outside the door, thought she was crying and waited a moment before she came in.

CHAPTER XXVIII

THE history of the world is a history of migrations, and to those already on the pages of time must now be added the tour of the "Eleanor" company which began again in the first week of January. Its formal record would probably read very much like that of the ten thousand Greeks in its dull monotony—"Hence they marched out two hundred miles to Buffalo where they played three nights and a *matinée*"—but its actual intimate story would more resemble "The Flight of a Tartar Tribe." It gave all that same impression of hurry and scamper.

A map of that tour of the "Eleanor" company should, in fact, have been hung on the wall of some routeing manager's office, covered with little red and black pins, as an awful example of how such a thing should never be done. In a checkered path all over New England and northern New York and once dipping down into Pennsylvania and Ohio, its trail showed a series of leaps, crisscrosses, return engagements, huge "jumps," and retracings of steps which would have driven any normal road manager into bankruptcy; but there was no other way for it. Starting out on an uncertain date, in the middle of the season, and under entirely independent auspices, the company had to snap an open date where it could, sometimes not knowing on Saturday night

where it would play on the second week following. The huge, pompous, and expensive "Eleanor" company traveled at times like a "Tom show" or a Gipsy circus, the marvel and outlaw of that theatrical winter, an unexplained comet shooting across the theatrical sky. It played one-night stands at ruinous cost. It "laid over" once from Wednesday to Monday. It played in towns that never before had seen a first-class attraction. It played in theaters so small that if every seat in the house had been taken, the receipts would not have covered even the day's expenses. At the "farthest west" of the tour in Ohio, Bellsmith, one night, asked Israels:

"Well, how do we stand for the first six weeks?"

To which Israels in reply shook his head, "Mr. Bellsmith, I don't dare to tell you."

Of course all hope of earning a profit had been entirely abandoned. That hope had been abandoned long before the company left Leicester, for Bellsmith had discovered that making over a musical comedy was very much like making over a house. A little paint here, a few bricks there, would seem, at first sight, to promise a complete renovation; but, once the new paint and new bricks are in place, all the rest of the structure begins to look shoddy.

For one thing, Bellsmith in the interest of his own music had tripled the regular orchestra which he "carried," laying no dependence at all on the orchestras of the "houses" that were visited. A "house" orchestra in a small city can be counted on only for cornets, but he had insisted on trumpets. The "duchess motif,"

as he had written it, required, for a theater orchestra, an inordinate amount of wood winds, with the result that he had been required correspondingly to build up his strings. When the tour finally ended in Boston, he was "carrying" twenty-four men besides the conductor and filling out with four more. Two double-bass players, far out of the average, had been required for "The Bull Fiddle Overture." One of them had been taken outright from a symphony orchestra.

The case was, in fact, best expressed on another occasion by Israels. Standing, in Bangor, Maine, in the rear of the house, with the local manager, the latter listened a moment to the full, rich tone of the overture and watched the phalanx of bows rising and falling. He too shook his head.

"Mr. Israels, how in the world do you do it?"

"We don't," replied Mr. Israels.

At the very worst point of the tour Bellsmith telegraphed to Dr. MacVickar:

Your treatment to date has cost me seventy-one thousand nine hundred dollars.

To which the doctor wired in reply:

The cost of a very modest yacht. Continue treatment in regular doses.

But yet, although they made no money, nevertheless the time came when they ceased to lose a great deal. House managers in larger cities began to hear of them

and wanted them. They went to Columbus especially to give a "feature" during the week of a large convention. There came a time when Israels dared to ask for a guarantee, for all the money "brought into the house" up to a certain figure. At another time he came to Bellsmith in grim amusement.

"Mr. Bellsmith, another week like the last and I think we 'll almost make expenses."

"In that case," said Bellsmith, "I think I 'll telegraph to New York for a basset horn. I 've always wanted a basset horn in that orchestra. It sounds just like Mrs. Trip when she's trying to talk like Ellen Terry. A good player could burlesque her, note for note."

The effect of all this on the rank and file of the company was curiously hilarious. Never having the slightest hope of making money, they were never depressed in the least by the prospect of losing any. As the weeks wore on, the spirit of the tour became very much that of a college glee-club. With Bellsmith himself, the members of the company became more intimate. From a mass of persons all strangely alike and all vaguely unpleasant, there began to rise into his ken distinct and amusing personalities. The echoes of these came to Dr. MacVickar, to whom Bellsmith wrote at odd moments, whenever the mood happened to strike him, notes written on a suit-case on the train, notes scrawled with thin ink on bureau tops of scanty hotels, more often notes merely jotted down in the wings on the margins of the programs of various houses at which they were playing. On one such program Bellsmith under-

lined the name of one girl and mailed it with the annotation :

Dear Doctor:

This is at last the chorus girl of fiction. I had despaired of finding her. She actually does support a widowed mother and a brother in the public schools. I have seen their pictures. I hasten to add that this is not true of our chorus in general.

BELLSMITH.

No, it was not true, distinctly not. On another occasion Bellsmith's fountain-pen (there can be no keener epitome of the change that had come over Bellsmith than the fact that he now carried a fountain-pen) drew a circle around another name on the program.

I never knew in my life [his comment ran to the doctor] that such total depravity existed in the world as is completely embodied in this young man. I doubt whether he has ever had a decent thought. His habitual expression is a leer. Yet he seems to eat well, sleep well, enjoy life, and is apparently advancing in his chosen profession. Science and medicine have always taught that this is impossible. Kindly forward an explanation.

Before the program was mailed, however, he added a postscript :

P.S. Since writing the above I myself have put science and medicine back in good standing. I have fired the young man. None of us could stand him around. But even I have to admit that the comparative saint who has taken his place

is far less effective as a dancer. In fact I am forced to say that he is a clod.

In one of the more leisurely letters which he wrote from a bureau top, Bellsmith had this to say about his experiences:

Dear Doctor:

I have found that the lowest form of human life is the amateur and that some persons, myself for instance, are born to remain amateurs to the end of their existence.

To date I have sunk eighty-four thousand dollars, more or less, in this show and traveled with it all winter, yet at least six times a day I am reminded by some one, with a kindly smile, that "of course you don't know anything about the show business."

Who does "know anything about the show business"? The youngest usher does, of course, and the man whose job it is to load our scenery at the station.

Massenet, Wagner and such, I take it—and even Verdi—did not "know anything about the show business." To the present generation I gather that even Gilbert and Sullivan figure as well-meaning amateurs. I met a man, the other day, who had this to say about De Koven: "Yes, De Koven wrote a cracker-jack song—'Oh, Promise Me'!" Quite true too, but would you like to be known principally for your work in vaccinations?

In the show business the rule seems to be that a man who takes money for his work and does it with a keenly calculated stupidity can be rated as a professional. It is not even the point of view of the average orator, for example, who really thinks that his mouthings are very fine, but a deliberate, deadly

earnest, almost pathetic cultivation of the very worst. The first sign of relaxed, moderated thought stamps a man as the amateur.

But the curious part is that most of these men are essentially sagacious, sophisticated, and frequently very witty in their private lives. In public they do solemnly what they burlesque among themselves, yet the clap trap in their professional point of view is just as earnest as the cynicism in their private lives. That's what I can't understand. You'd think they'd break down, sometimes, and laugh. There's where the augurs had it all over men like Harcourt & Gay.

This point Bellsmith also liked to argue out with Surdam, from whom, in fact, he was gaining almost the professional point of view.

One morning, in the black leather seats of a smoking-car in northern New York, they were going over the words of some of the songs, for the "Eleanor" show had not even now advanced beyond the necessity for more alteration and if the music of the original production had been perfunctory the words of the songs had been distinctly worse than that.

It was rather a sore point with Israel and Charlie Barnes, that of those songs, for although only four of them were now used in the show, Fritz Melcher, the original "lyric" writer, must, under the terms of the contract, be mailed a check for three dollars out of every hundred dollars that came in at the window of the box-office and Charlie Barnes was very closely in touch with that window.

With a pile of songs on their laps, Bellsmith and Surdam were rapidly killing the words of still another

"lyric" which, although dead, must still be paid for.

Suddenly Bellsmith pushed the whole pile away from him.

"Do you mean to say?" he demanded of Surdam, "that Harcourt & Gay really advanced that man ten thousand dollars for writing that tosh?"

Israels had come down the aisle of the car and now sat opposite them, smoking a big cigar.

"Who's that you're talking about?" he demanded. "Fritz Melcher?"

Bellsmith nodded, and Israels, leaning over, began tapping his knee.

"Let me tell you something," he said. "I know for a fact that Fritz Melcher has laid up a hundred and fifty thousand dollars in Liberty bonds in the last three years. If Harcourt & Gay had n't paid him that retainer, he could have gone right out and got it from any producer in New York."

Bellsmith looked down at the lines of the song.

"But what I can't understand," he insisted, "is why they have to pay *any* one for this sort of thing. Why could n't the office boy do it? Why could n't one moderately intelligent man be hired at fifty dollars a week to write the lyrics for all the shows in the world? They're all the same."

He leaned back and extemporized:

"If you're true, love,
I won't be blue, love,
Won't you do, love,
Just what I say?

We 'll come back, love,
And deal the pack, love—”

“Absolute piffle!” snorted Bellsmith. “Any one could sit still and do it for hours. It’s just da-da-da. Why do they have to pay for it at all?”

“Well,” smiled Surdam, summing up the whole profession of authorship, “I suppose it takes *somebody* even to write ‘da-da-da.’”

And finally, rounding out, once and for all, his program impressions of life on the road, Bellsmith made this general note to the doctor:

Musical comedy and scent will be forever associated in my mind. The amount of talcum-powder consumed by twenty-two chorus girls and three principals simply passes comprehension. It gets into your clothes and your hair like cigar smoke or cinders. You taste it in the potatoes at meals. It does not even leave you in the sanctity of your chamber but bursts out afresh as you draw off your coat. We have all kinds in our midst, from a deadly jungle variety which conjures up visions of tom-toms and streets of Cairo to a delicate evanescent sort which sometimes floats by you in the wings and brings back, with startling clearness, memories of junior proms and pink debutantes and nights at Bar Harbor. To tell the frank truth, however, I’m getting to be awfully fond of the whole blooming bunch.

“Ah!” thought the doctor, “I wondered when—”
And, sure enough, on the week before Easter he received a telegram:

CHAPTER XXIX

Miss Marshall and I were married in Nashua, New Hampshire, this afternoon.

Arnold Bellsmith.

CHAPTER XXX

TAP! Tap! Tap!

The first night in Boston, the ultimate goal of the "Eleanor" show.

Ziegler, the orchestra leader, raised his arms, and his men straightened into attention. Half the lights in the house went slowly dim and the footlights flared up, forming a warm, golden border on the lower edge of the curtain. An expectant silence passed over the orchestra circle while the attachés and idle loungers at the back of the house sauntered, from force of habit, up to the rail behind the last row of seats. Among them was Arnold Bellsmith, his hands instinctively clenched, his fingers chilly with nervousness. His eyes were fixed on the orchestra leader's back, his shoulders instinctively "humping" the tempo of the rests which composed the first two bars of the overture.

The conductor, beating the cadence of the unplayed notes, glanced to right and to left, then made a vigorous snap toward the contrabasses. At his gesture a curious wave of surprise swept over the house, for, instead of the blare of brass which such a gesture at such a moment usually brings forth, there followed nothing but the grotesque, swaggering pizzicato on the double-bass viols:

Thrum-Thrum-Thrum-Thrum
Thruma-Thruma-Thrum-Thrum.

Barnes himself had described it accurately. It was irresistibly "a man with a wooden leg."

To the bass viols were next added the cellos and then the violas, the second and first violins, in increasing importance and increasing volume, all playing that one absurd little rhythm, alternate instruments bowing and alternate instruments pizzicato. And all the time, unceasing, monotonous as a clock-tower, came that principal theme from the contrabasses:

Thrum-Thrum-Thrum-Thrum,
Thruma-Thruma-Thrum-Thrum,

It was a progression as unmistakable as a flight of stairs and as massive as a pyramid. As the rhythm advanced to and included the first violins the least musical soul in the house was looking expectantly toward the silent side of the orchestra, wondering what would happen when the spark of melody should leap across the gap and set a blaze on the other side.

It happened just as curiosity reached the bursting-point, for as the first violins reached the end of their little rondo Zeigler, turning to the other side of his orchestra, made that same expectant snap and, from clear at the other end, the lowest kettledrum took up the rhythm, echoing it back:

Pum-Pum-Pum-Pum
Puma-Puma-Pum-Pum.

But only for a minute did this reply rest with the kettledrums, for suddenly, with another step, in absolute contrast, burst out the clarinets in a whirling and screeching cackle.

Yet, in grim determination, apparently mirthlessly, one side of the orchestra still went on in its endless, wooden-legged

Thrum-Thrum-Thrum-Thrum,
Thruma-Thruma--Thrum-Thrum

while the other side—the wood winds and the brass, muted to a tinny squeak—fussed and fumed and fretted all over three octaves, the higher kettledrum now coming in at all sorts of odd intervals with fussy, little, tottering, old-maidish steps that made petulant little rushes, then stopped inanely just short of the expected climax.

And endlessly, monotonously, kept up the contrabasses:

Thrum-Thrum-Thrum-Thrum,
Thruma-Thruma-Thrum-Thrum.

A leonine man with gray hair in the second row of the orchestra circle turned to a pinched little man with nose-glasses who was sitting behind him.

‘That’s one of the weirdest things I ever heard,’ said the leonine man, ‘and yet it’s pure music. Ever hear of this thing before?’

The little man shook his head impatiently. His eyes were on the conductor. He didn’t want to be inter-

rupted, but the leonine man was very much pleased with himself.

"Sounds to me like a tone poem built on the theme of 'The Jabberwock,'" he added, and jotted it down on the margin of his program,—*"Jabberwock theme."* He intended to use that in his review in *"The Boston Times"* the following morning.

A French horn blared, the theme and the tempo were changed, and slowly the orchestra wove into the saner melody of the *"Eve Song."* In its various movements the overture rose and fell, then, subtly, at the very end, slipped back by gradual steps again into the bull-fiddle motif. The remaining lights of the house went dark, double curtains slowly parted, and upon an empty stage, into a garden scene bathed in mellow sunlight, came stumping grotesque little Charlie Barnes, in his rôle of the wooden-legged gardener. As he himself had said, his motif had been *"planted."* With almost a roar of delight, the spirit of the audience rose up to greet him.

At the rear of the house Bellsmith, standing taut, smiled to himself and relaxed, as if a perilous moment had been passed safely. As he turned, Israels sauntered up to him in the semi-darkness, the imaginary toothpick still twirling in his lips. As he had always been stoic in misfortune, so now was he stereotyped in success.

"Knocking 'em cold," commented Israels.

Bellsmith's eyes went back to the stage, but Israels sauntered off again on other quests of his own. The stage interested Israels less than any other part of a theater, and even Bellsmith found his attention wander-

ing, as if that overture alone and not the whole comedy that was to follow had been the culmination of his winter's anxiety and his winter's efforts.

Even when Tilly came on and was greeted by a really spontaneous burst of applause, he roused himself only momentarily. Whether it really was weariness or whether it was that same dreamy detachment which had characterized his whole life, like that of his fathers, it still remained impossible for Bellsmith to connect the sight of Tilly on the stage with his thoughts of her in their life together. Night after night, for two weeks now, he had watched her over the footlights, trying to whip himself into a sort of conventional and expected excitement at her entrances, saying over and over to himself, "That is my wife! That is my wife!"

But it had been of no use. In her make-up and behind the footlights Tilly Marshall still remained for him curiously Tilly Marshall, entirely another person, very much as she had appeared to him the first night that he had seen her. Only when he joined her each evening after the show did she revert again into the other Tilly—into Tilly his wife. Possibly when she took up another rôle, one which began actually after their first life together, it might be different. This rôle of hers in "Eleanor" was still a curious linking of one phase of life to another.

But without any question the show was "going big" before the Boston audience. Back and forth Charlie Barnes and Mrs. Trip chased each other throughout the whole first act, the one always just disappearing out right as the other appeared on left, the bull-fiddle motif

anticipating the one, the clarinet motif announcing the other, the two just overlapping, never quite joining. Between Tilly and Tommy Knight the lovers' meeting developed into its quarrel, the quarrel into a parting and the act progressed to its climax.

Under the mellow, sunlit wall, uncannily as Barnes had visualized it that first afternoon, was ranged the quaint row of old-fashioned flowers, and among them stood Tilly Marshall, alone in the garden, her head bowed in obstinate, yet wistful regret.

Slowly the orchestra wove its way into the melody, and suddenly, deer-like, the girl raised her head, for over the wall were coming the notes of the lover she had just sent away in anger:

“Ah, women, all daughters of Eve,
Ever faithless, ever heartless,
The love that we fondly believe
Never changing, never wand'ring—”

Through its two verses, with the lover's voice ever diminishing in the distance, the song gently faded away, then slowly and wanly died out, in the very middle of the bar, a faint broken cadence.

Then, *crash!* with a blare of music the chorus was on—a few moments of laughing, chattering song, then off again, and once more the girl stood alone in the garden.

Then slowly, as it seemed, from her very feet, the faint thread of the thin, muted melody began rising again, swelling and swelling, then slowly dimming and dimming into a point so tenuous that its last thread of sound

was not distinguishable from the absolute silence which succeeded it.

The audience sat almost straining for the voice of the violin to go on. But nothing more came. As to the girl herself on the stage, so to the audience in its seats, it seemed to come as a shock—the realization that the voice was actually gone, that the memory was actually stilled.

During ten seconds hung the spirit of the echoing, rhythmical silence—not a voice from the stage, not a note from the orchestra, not a stir in the house. Then slowly, with a little sigh that could more be imagined than heard, the girl picked up the single flower, pondered it wistfully for a moment, then nervelessly let it fall. So tense was the audience that the rolling folds of the double curtain came as a complete surprise—a surprise which left hurt uncertainty for an instant and then a thunderous burst of applause.

Bellsmith let out his drawn breath with entire satisfaction and turned toward the head of the nearest aisle to overhear the comments of such members of the audience as might come out between the acts. From such as did, mostly unattached men, he knew that he should overhear little—merely remarks such as “Some show!” or “Gee! that last got my goat!” but even these he did not want to miss. He had hardly taken his place, when a firm hand was pressed on his shoulder and a pleasant voice said in his ear:

“Mr. Bellsmith?”

Bellsmith turned and found himself faced by an agreeable but rather gaunt and Yankee-looking young man

in a commonplace felt hat and a careless suit of ready-made clothes who might, apparently, have been an instructor from some small college around Boston.

His air, however, was not that of a college instructor. His smile was one of a quiet and authoritative assurance, and it was not until Bellsmith's blank look had told him that he was unknown that he added the explanation:

"Oh! I thought you might know me. I am Al Harcourt."

CHAPTER XXXI

IT was a greeting intended to be cordial enough but one made uncertain by surprise which Bellsmith returned to the newcomer, for a figure less like that which he had expected in connection with the name "Al Harcourt" it would have been difficult to imagine. As one will do, in the case of a name which has grown familiar from constant tradition, Bellsmith had, for some months, had in his mind a picture of the senior and financial member of the firm of Harcourt & Gay, a picture which had recurred so often to his imagination that he had actually come to believe it the real one.

His mental portrait had been of a man of fifty-odd, of the boulevard-banker type, heavy-jowled and cynical, faultlessly dressed but always wearing a derby hat, even at his desk, always smoking a black cigar and having, especially, a broad, black eye-glass ribbon and a little white edging at the top of his waistcoat.

And now the reality! A man little if any older than Bellsmith and looking exactly—well, just that—like a tutor from Amherst. It was a shock but wholly a pleasant one.

Harcourt nodded toward the now closed curtains and the empty orchestra pit.

"How 's she going?"

"Pretty well," replied Bellsmith, diffidently.

It had amused him more than once to observe how, from the minute that he had entered the new profession, he had instinctively adopted its mannerisms. His attitude now had taken on, unconsciously, that same guarded reticence which he had seen in Israels the first time that he had spoken to him in the lobby of the Leicester Lyceum.

Harcourt laughed. "It has cost you some money, has n't it?"

Bellsmith flushed. "A bit."

Harcourt's eyes wandered back to the curtain. "You 've fixed the show up quite a little."

With a tartness which in him was unusual, Bellsmith replied curtly:

"It needed it."

Harcourt looked at him keenly and with laughing eyes. The sensitive pride of a young producer was nothing novel to him. Indeed he still had it himself.

"Mr. Bellsmith," he said abruptly, "suppose we go to the office and talk."

It was Bellsmith, this time, who led the way to an office very different from the cubbyhole in the old Leicester theater. Its anteroom was like a drawing-room, and not merely a drawing-room but a drawing-room on the stage—white pillars and velvet portières. Harcourt bit off the end of a cigar, spat it out, and sank into a big lounging chair.

"Well, Mr. Bellsmith," he began abruptly, "what are you going to do now?"

"Do now?" repeated Bellsmith, cautiously.

Harcourt gazed thoughtfully at the end of his cigar.

"I mean," he began slowly, "I mean what are your plans for next year? I suppose you intend to play here in Boston as long as you can but where will you go after that? Of course you can't go to New York."

"Why not?" demanded Bellsmith.

Harcourt laughed, not unpleasantly but in a way that showed the childishness of the question.

"Why, my dear fellow, you can't. You simply can't, that's all. The show has been there once and—we might as well say it—it failed. You can never take it back there again. They wouldn't stand for it."

"As for that," said Bellsmith, "they told me that I could never run this show at all."

Harcourt laughed appeasingly. "You really are a bulldog, aren't you? I really believe you have some wild idea of buying a theater outright."

"Not quite," said Bellsmith, but in a tone which showed that the guess had not been so far wrong as it might have been.

"Heaven knows," explained Harcourt, "that I wish you could go to New York. We'd profit by it as much as you would, but the fact remains. For all practical purposes, 'Eleanor' is dead. You must know that as well as I do."

To Bellsmith, still in his first elation of success, the words had really almost a ghastly sound.

"But it's entirely a new show," he argued.

"Yes, it is, in a way," admitted Harcourt, "but it's just enough like the old one so that the public would feel cheated if you tried to put it on again. The cast is somewhat the same, and the name is the same."

"Change the name," suggested Bellsmith.

"If you do that, what would be the good of taking it there? You would lose all you have gained, all the reputation you have built up on the road."

It was the first concession he had made, the first admission that Bellsmith had done anything at all with the once hopeless "Eleanor," and Bellsmith was still boyish enough to seize on it.

"Then you do think that we 've gathered some—reputation?"

Harcourt's cruelty had apparently been unintended, for, without any appearance of a change in mood, he was at once perfectly willing to be enthusiastic.

"Reputation?" he repeated. "Why, of course you 've built up a reputation."

He paused, shaking his head. "But it must have cost you a pretty penny."

He smiled and looked more closely at Bellsmith in a disarming way.

"Of course it would n't have been hard to guess, Mr. Bellsmith, that we fully expected to get the show back—or what we wanted of it—in two or three months, but"—he nodded back toward the auditorium—"I don't imagine that you 're in the mood to sell now."

"I had n't thought about it," said Bellsmith stiffly, but Harcourt was now thoroughly launched in his more genial manner.

"For two or three weeks," he explained, "we expected to hear from you almost any day to take up our offer, and then we lost track of you. Then reports began to come in. You see the clipping bureau was still

sending us the notices. We couldn't believe it—the hit you seemed to be making. At first we thought it was simply because you were playing those little towns where any New York attraction would stand them on their ear, but, after a while, we began to run across people who had actually seen the show—advance agents for other concerns and the vaudeville crowd. They said you were really getting away with it.”

This was more like it. Bellsmith sat back and let Harcourt go on.

“You see, all the people in the business thought that the show was still ours, or that we were back of it, and when it finally got to the point where they began to congratulate us, it was rather embarrassing. Walter Gay himself ran up to Worcester to see it last week. He was knocked silly. He said you 'd worked miracles with it.”

This was at last what Bellsmith wanted to hear, and, as if Harcourt himself had known that sooner or later he must come to this admission, he now continued, quite without reserve:

“Mr. Bellsmith, what you 've done is exactly what we have always said would have to be done in a season or two. You 've gone straight back to old-time operetta. Musical comedy, for season after season, has been growing into an elaborate vaudeville show, but you have had the idea—”

“It was n't my idea,” interrupted Bellsmith. “The idea came right from a man in your own company.”

Harcourt started, with interest. “Who? Surdam?”

“No. Charlie Barnes.”

Harcourt simply tossed his head with a condescending smile.

"Charlie Barnes. Oh, Charlie Barnes! Yes, I know that he's always talking. Charlie's a good fellow and a first-class comedian, but his ideas are wild as a hawk. You know yourself that that show out there isn't Charlie Barnes. It's just what I say it is. It's natural evolution. We've seen it coming—more music, real music, a central plot, a real story—but you beat us to it."

Over Bellsmith began to come a curious increasing feeling of having slipped back for two or three months. In some degree Harcourt was right. It was evolution, but at the same time Bellsmith could not but watch the man cynically. Harcourt, and probably his partner, were at heart so exactly what Barnes had said they would be. Bellsmith now could believe perfectly that neither one of them, neither Harcourt nor Gay, had ever seen this change coming and that neither would have ever put any faith in it, if it had been pointed out to them. But now that some one else had actually done it, had really put out a show with real music, they honestly believed that they had seen it coming, had had the idea in the first place. Would they follow still further their usual rule and pay any price to get it?

A short silence had fallen. Harcourt was apparently waiting for suggestions, but Bellsmith had none to make. Without meaning that the gesture have any significance he looked at his watch. The second act would be on presently, and he did not want to miss that, even for this talk; but Harcourt apparently

considered his gesture a hint and immediately came down to business.

"Mr. Bellsmith," he said abruptly, "just what do you want?"

Bellsmith looked up in surprise.

"What do I want? I don't know that I want anything. Do you mean that you still want to buy back the show?"

"Well, perhaps a certain part of it."

"What part of it?"

"For one thing," began Harcourt, "we want Charlie Barnes. And then we want Miss Marshall. By the way, Mr. Bellsmith, I understand that I am to congratulate you."

Bellsmith nodded, and Harcourt went on: "Your wife, Mr. Bellsmith, has got the making of a real star. You did a big thing when you gave her that 'Eve' song after Maida Maine left you."

This was too much for Bellsmith. "Mrs. Bellsmith was picked for the lead before Maida Maine ever thought of leaving. That was another of Charlie Barnes's ideas."

"Was it?" asked Harcourt, casually. He was wholly unimpressed, but a moment later he showed why. He had bigger things on his mind. He paused and studied Bellsmith in silence.

"Mr. Bellsmith," he burst out suddenly, "you know, don't you, that you've got us sewed up tight?"

Bellsmith looked at him in amazement. "Sewed up tight? What in the world do you mean?"

Harcourt still could not believe in his innocence. "Don't you honestly know?"

Bellsmith shook his head.

"Well, I'll be damned," commented Harcourt.

He paused again in his utter unbelief; then slowly explained.

"Walter Gay, to be frank, made the bull of his life when he sold you that show. I was in Chicago at the time, but believe *me* I gave him merry hell when I got back. He ought never to be trusted with anything in front of the curtain. Don't you know that you own the services of Tony Gaylord, the composer, and Fritz Melcher, the lyric writer? Did n't you know that you control their entire output for three years?"

"I did n't know it," replied Bellsmith. "I've never seen the contracts with them."

"Of course you have n't," replied Harcourt, "because those contracts are still in our safe." He shook his head. "My dear man, this is positively criminal. Let me tell you how it happened."

He leaned back and relit his cigar. In the lobby the gong for the second act was pealing, but Bellsmith made no move to rise.

"In the first place," explained Harcourt, "you know, of course, that Tony Gaylord and Fritz Melcher made the biggest hit of last year with 'Helena' and, before that, with 'Betty.' They made fortunes for Rice & McLaughlin, those shows. Those two boys are the biggest money-makers in the country to-day. Last year of course we wanted to get them tied up to us, and this

show gave us our first chance. Rice & McLaughlin had got them pretty cheap before, and they weren't quite ready to ante, so we slipped in before they had a chance and signed up Melcher and Gaylord for 'Eleanor.' "

It was now Bellsmith who was not greatly impressed and Harcourt who was pleading the case.

" 'Eleanor,' as it proved, was a lemon for us, but that's neither here nor there. We had given each of those boys, Gaylord and Melcher, ten thousand dollars retainer. Our object was that, in that same contract to write 'Eleanor' for us, there was a clause that gave us the producing rights of all their output for three years. But furthermore,—and here is the joker—there was also a clause which provided that we could dispose of the contract as a whole but not any part of it. All or nothing. That is a clause which frequently appears in such contracts to keep a producer from dividing responsibility. It is purely a formal clause, and for that reason Walter Gay forgot all about it.

"In other words," announced Harcourt, "when you bought 'Eleanor' you also got the entire rights to the services of the most popular composer and the most popular song writer in New York."

"But I don't want them," said Bellsmith, blankly. "I think they're rotten!"

Harcourt laughed aloud. "To tell the truth, so does Walter Gay. He's a man after your own heart, Mr. Bellsmith. But the fact remains that those boys are big commercial possibilities. The public likes to dance to their music even if you or Walter Gay don't care

to listen to it. With proper steering those rights of yours will be worth anywhere from fifty thousand to two hundred thousand a year to some one—to Melcher and Gaylord themselves if to no one else. You see, all the things like publishing rights and phonograph rights depend on the music being brought out first in the right kind of show. You've got a lot of people besides us tied up if you only knew it."

It did look differently when expressed in that way.

"But why," gasped Bellsmith, "why are you telling me now? I don't believe that I should ever have found it out if you had n't told me."

"My dear fellow," protested Harcourt, "we're not wholly crooks, although I know that that's probably the opinion you had of the whole show business three or four months ago.

"Besides, you would have known it soon enough if we had ever tried to do anything about it. Tony Gaylord knew it and Fritz Melcher knew it. The whole three of us are in a delightful situation. We advanced them twenty thousand dollars for a show that never made us ten cents. We could get it back if we still had them for two years more, but now we wake up and find that they've got our money but we haven't got them. It's you who have got them. They've got a new show right now, the biggest thing they've done yet, all ready for next year. But we can't do a thing about it and no more can any one else until we get this mess straightened out. Any time you pleased you could simply get out an injunction and stop the whole show."

Bellsmith grinned. "I'd almost like to do it.

People are forever getting out injunctions against me."

Harcourt laughed. "I heard about that—from Israel."

"But why did n't *they* tell me?" demanded Bellsmith. "I mean Melcher or Gaylord. If they were my private slaves it seems as if I ought to have had a salaam or two occasionally."

"To tell the truth," admitted Harcourt, "all of us have been lying low to see what would happen. You could n't blame us and you could n't blame Melcher and Gaylord. They did n't want to be tied up to an unknown producer who might never produce but yet could keep them from writing a line for the stage. Of course you understand that sooner or later somebody would have had to buy you out. None of us could have afforded to have that uncertainty hanging over our heads forever. But at first, when we thought that your experiment with the show business was going to last just about a week, of course—"

"You were waiting around to be in at the death," suggested Bellsmith, "and buy me out for a couple of fish-hooks."

Harcourt laughed. "Well, Mr. Bellsmith, it's human nature to want to buy a thing as cheaply as possible. We thought that you'd be glad enough to get the whole thing off your shoulders and never see the inside of a theater again."

Bellsmith drew a long face. "There were times when I did feel just that way. If your first offer, that Saturday night, had come three or four hours earlier I should have jumped at it."

Harcourt grinned. "We expected that you would, as it was. Anyway, it's your turn to laugh now. You fooled us. You've kept the show alive for nearly five months, and, as nearly as I can find out, you can keep it alive for five years if you feel like it. We can't wait that long. We have got to make our plans for next season. The only thing to do was to put our cards on the table, and now there they are. What do you want to do?"

"What do you?" parried Bellsmith.

Harcourt was evidently ready for just that question, for he spoke slowly but very precisely.

"Well," he replied, "there are two things that we can do. First we can take the whole business right off your hands, play through the Boston engagement, and then put the show in the storehouse."

Bellsmith was looking at the floor. "I don't think I want to sell until we have finished our run here in Boston." He smiled quizzically. "It's too sweet. It's the first real taste of success we have had."

Harcourt laughed sympathetically. "Good boy! I can understand that. I wouldn't take that away from you for the world. All right then. You keep it through the Boston run. After that we will take the show and lay it away."

"For how much?" asked Bellsmith, but, as he said it, it sounded almost sacrilegious, as if he were talking of selling his old house in Leicester.

"How much has it stood you in?" asked Harcourt promptly.

"About ninety thousand dollars," replied Bellsmith, "including the purchase price."

Harcourt whistled. "As much as that? Mr. Bellsmith, you're worse than my partner. You ought not to be let out without a guardian."

"So they told me when I first bought it," replied Bellsmith.

Harcourt was thinking rapidly. "Of course you'll get some of that back here in Boston. Your show's going well and it's just the place for it. We may be able to make a figure on that basis."

"But my people?" suggested Bellsmith. "I don't like the idea of their being thrown out suddenly if you close up the show."

"As to that," answered Harcourt, "of course we intended to take over some of them anyway. Charlie Barnes we want and of course Miss Marshall—if she intends to remain on the stage. As to the rest, you yourself never intended to support them for the rest of their lives, although I imagine that some of them would be willing enough to have you do it."

"What is the other proposition?" asked Bellsmith abruptly.

"The other proposition?" replied Harcourt. "The other proposition is this: Why don't you come in with us?"

"With you?"

Harcourt nodded. "Exactly. Why don't you come in with the firm of Harcourt & Gay?"

"Harcourt, Gay & Bellsmith," mused Bellsmith. "It sounds like an old English revel. I'm afraid I

should have to be a silent partner, with such a funny name as mine."

"Funny names are worth money in the show business," replied Harcourt. "But, seriously, Mr. Bellsmith, why don't you do it?"

"Would I be of any use to you?" asked Bellsmith, frankly.

"You would be of a great deal of use to us," answered Harcourt. "In the first place you have something that we want very badly. You could hold us up if you wanted to—all our next year's plans—but I don't think you want to do it. I don't think you went into the show business with the idea of making money out of it."

"Hardly," said Bellsmith.

"And aside from that," continued Harcourt, "you're the kind of man we want. The show business isn't standing still. You've put rather a jolt in it yourself. Of course we've got to go slowly. For the present we need the sort of shows that Gaylord and Melcher are writing. There will always be some demand for those, especially in New York City, but we're already beginning to think of to-morrow—and the day after that. Your show, as you have it now, is much more the type of thing that we used to get from Vienna, and we'll never have a better bet than those old Viennese operettas. Men with your kind of talent are scarce in this country.

"Now, there's your best bet," said Harcourt. "Think it over. We can sit down whenever you say so and make an appraisal of just what you have here.

You can take any interest in our firm that you want, up to one third, and pay the difference almost any way you like. How does that strike you?"

Bellsmith sat thinking. "You don't want an answer at once?"

Harcourt laughed. "*You* did, the night you bought 'Eleanor.' "

"And that," replied Bellsmith, "should have taught both of us a good lesson. No, Mr. Harcourt, I can't give an answer at once."

"How soon, then. To-morrow?"

"Possibly."

"All right, then, I 'll stay over for your performance to-morrow."

CHAPTER XXXII

AS Bellsmith passed back into the auditorium a glance told him that the last act was almost half over, and a little pang struck him. This had been a special luxury which he had been reserving for himself, the joy of listening to the whole show, undisturbed, on its first night of real success before a metropolitan audience, but even from what remained he found his attention continually wandering, continually turning back to the newer problem which had just been presented to him. This was rather a tough way to have the rule work out. It had been decidedly comforting to learn by experience that trouble tended to lose its force before it actually struck. It was not so agreeable to find that the same was true of success.

Yet the show, without any question, was going magnificently. The strained, intent attitude of the rows of heads in the semi-darkness told him that; the utter silence that reigned in the dim auditorium, broken at just the expected moments by ripples of laughter or by spontaneous waves of applause. With that, certainly, he could not quarrel. He tried to settle deliberately into his planned enjoyment of as much of the act as was left, but the spell had been broken. Like Israels and Harcourt he found himself wandering restlessly away from the stage itself and into the lobby.

Harcourt had spoken the truth and he knew it. "Eleanor" was at last a success, an artistic success and the only success at which he had seriously aimed, but, just the same, poor "Eleanor's" days were numbered. For all his trials, tribulations, his labor, his risks, and his final victory, "Eleanor" would, in a month at the most, pass completely into oblivion.

Even the lobby offered no consolation as, in truth, it seldom offered much to Harcourt or Israels. Not a soul was in sight except the Boston version of Oliver who was yawning behind his brass grill. With one of those inane impulses which seize men in moments of crowded loneliness Bellsmith wandered over to the little glass window, asked for a telegraph blank, and wrote a message to Dr. MacVickar:

Success to all appearances, but feeling rather lost. What does one do next? No platitudes, please.

BELLSMITH.

Cheered for a moment by even this long-distance word with the doctor, he went back into the auditorium. On the stage, the scenes were rapidly passing, the songs and dances and carefully grouped tableaux of which he knew every gesture. It was the undercurrent of music that his mind subconsciously followed, but, even in that elaborate structure, he knew every note. Irresistibly his mind would leave the too familiar score and go back to the newer problem.

What, in cold fact, had a partnership with the firm of Harcourt & Gay to offer him? Bellsmith was getting a taint of the Israels in him now, and he had no

particular faith in the idea that the offer was as flattering as it might seem. It was not difficult to guess that his reputation as a free-handed young millionaire had more to do with it than his reputation as a musical genius.

On the other hand, Harcourt & Gay was unmistakably a firm of the very highest rank. Work with such producers would undoubtedly be of importance. His mind wandered back to a time when, as Dr. MacVickar had shrewdly guessed, a firm of far less importance had condescendingly returned his first comic opera, unread. That poor little thing! He even had to stop to remember its name. "The Count of Casco," that was it. It did look childish now.

A change in the tempo of the orchestra music made him instinctively glance up at the stage. It seemed almost impossible that things were going so beautifully up there when he himself was possessed by such an unreasoning spirit of doubt.

Charlie Barnes slipped up in one line which had always been fatal for him, since the first rehearsal. He said, "Ah, your Highness, this is too much!" when the joke for which he was "feeding" Mrs. Trip depended on his saying "Ah, your Grace." Three months ago that one word had seemed of vital importance, but now Bellsmith merely grinned at the utterly pointless lines that followed. The mistake seemed more homelike than the correct line would have been.

The lights on the garden wall were steel-blue now with a looming moon creeping up by imperceptible fractions throughout the act. The low music of the or-

chestra, which had been virtually uninterrupted throughout the two whole acts of the new "Eleanor," began again weaving back into familiar chords; then slowly crept out the air which in its various arrangements was the principal theme of the operetta. Now, toward the final and joyous climax, it was a mocking hilarious, wholly gleeful air, an air full of invitation:

Ah! women, all daughters of Eve,
Ever faithless, ever heartless,
The love that we fondly believe,
Never changing, never wand'ring—

Tommy Knight, the stage lover, now returning from his self-imposed exile, came leaping out on the stage, very boyish and wholly immaculate in evening clothes such as are never seen anywhere except in shop-windows and behind the footlights. He looked around eagerly, then passed on in through the lighted door of the Casino. It was all deliciously artificial, but for that very reason, rather than despite it, Bellsmith had come to love it as one loves for its own sake the studied theatricalness of grand opera.

A minute of evening silence, almost fragrant in its reality, hung over the garden. The big, slow moon rose its last inch over the wall and flooded the garden with its white light. At the same moment Tilly appeared, standing in the gateway, an evening cloak thrown back from her thin, girlish shoulders. A little murmur passed over the audience. Then the girl moved on. Bellsmith turned and walked back to the lobby. That one tableau had been all that he had been waiting to see. Five min-

utes later the orchestra was banging out its finale and the audience was swarming up the aisles.

Bellsmith lingered with Israels in the lobby for a moment or two watching the departing crowds, then went back to his wife's dressing-room. Tilly was almost ready for him and, even ahead of the chorus, they walked out into the street, still crowded and brisk in the balmy April night air. It is the odd moments off duty that make any profession enjoyable for those that follow it, that linger longest in professional memory, and Bellsmith and Tilly always prolonged this leisurely evening walk from the theater to their hotel. Tilly was wearing a long cape over her street gown and under it their fingers were clasped.

"Tired, dear?" asked Bellsmith.

His wife nodded. He was tired himself but it was still a delicious sort of weariness. He knew that hers was of a more genuine kind. A "first night" for any one is a terrible ordeal.

"Simon," said Bellsmith, for even after four months the question of names had not been definitely settled, "what do you want to do after this tour?"

It was a moment to which both of them had been looking forward but yet avoiding from a vague sort of superstition. One does not mention future plans in the middle of a whirlpool.

"What do I want to do?" repeated Tilly. "I can tell you exactly what I want to do after this tour. I want to find a spot with the ocean on one side and a pine-tree on the other, and I want to sit on a broad piazza with pillows and books and have servants four

deep bringing me iced tea and macaroons. And I want you there in very swanky gray tweeds—white riding breeches probably and mahogany boots—looking absolutely useless—just as you used to look.

“Why did you ask?” she added, a moment later.

“Because,” replied Bellsmith slowly, knowing that his answer would not be wholly pleasant news, “Al Harcourt was in the theater to-night. He and I had a long talk.”

As he had feared, he felt his wife’s fingers clench nervously over his.

“What did he want?” she demanded, in entirely another tone of voice.

“He wanted me to become a partner in the firm of Harcourt & Gay.”

“And you’re not going to do it,” snapped Tilly fiercely. Then, almost plaintively she added, “Are you?”

“Why?” asked Bellsmith, “don’t you approve of Harcourt & Gay?”

His wife sighed wearily. “Oh, I suppose they’re as good as any one else—better in a way. But it’s the same old story. I don’t want you in that connection at all. You’re a sweet old thing, but you’d never be a theatrical man in ten thousand years.”

“That seems to be agreed by all hands,” said Bellsmith. “Is there anything in the world that I can be?”

“Yes, you can be my husband. No one ever did that before—and could n’t have done it as well.”

But, as for Bellsmith, so for her, a worrying note had

been put in the evening of her triumph. Like him, she could not get away from it now.

"What did you tell him?" she demanded, suddenly.

"Tell Harcourt? I did n't tell him anything. I'm going to see him again to-morrow."

They walked on for nearly a block in silence through a side street less crowded.

"Well, dearie," said Tilly at last, "you can do what you like, of course. If it had n't been for the show business I suppose we should never have married, but please don't let Al Harcourt get *all* your money. I insist that you save out enough to buy me at least eight summer frocks and a pair of white canvas shoes."

"As to that," replied Bellsmith, "you need n't worry. If I go in at all it will be with my eyes wide open—or rather the eyes of the Pilgrim Trust Co. Judge Marker will have his cold scrutiny on all the details."

"In that case," said Tilly, "I shall feel very much relieved."

Bellsmith looked down at her with a rather weak effort at mock irony.

"You think a lot of your husband, don't you—as a man of affairs?"

"Oh, I know," agreed Tilly wearily, "but who wants to marry an adding-machine, anyway?"

CHAPTER XXXIII

THEY entered the hotel and went directly up to their apartment.

"I 'm going to bed," announced Tilly, heading at once for the inner rooms. "I 'm absolutely done up. Are you going to stay out here and browse?"

"Just a minute," pleaded Bellsmith. "I want to smoke a cigar. Besides, I think that company 's coming. I don't want to break his heart."

His wife disappeared and Bellsmith luxuriously sat down for his usual midnight smoke. His prophecy had not been wrong, for a moment later there came a masonic tap at the door and Charlie Barnes, in his usual snuff-colored suit and brown derby hat, came grinning into the room. The custom inaugurated on that first Saturday night in Bellsmith's library had grown during the winter into a permanent institution which even Bellsmith's marriage had hardly interrupted. Without a word the host salvaged a glass from the bath-room and took a bottle from a kit-bag which was lying on the floor. At sight of the bottle Barnes's eye gleamed.

"Then it got here all right, did it?" he asked.

"Oh, yes," said Bellsmith. "William was so anxious about it that he wanted to get his private policeman to bring it up all the way."

With the glasses in his hand Bellsmith paused.

"Charlie," he suggested, "wouldn't it be a good idea to go to your room and talk? Poor Tilly is tired out. I'm afraid we'll keep her awake if we try to talk here."

"By all means! By all means!" agreed the comedian.

As they went toward the door, however, Tilly came flouncing out from the inner room in a priceless lace negligée. "Gift of the groom," was the thought that flashed through Charlie Barnes's mind as he saw it.

"Where are you going?" demanded Tilly.

"Nowhere, darling," replied her husband. "I'm just going down to Charlie's room to drink heavily."

"Oh, that's all right," agreed Tilly, appeased. She apologized to Barnes, "People are always trying to get him to talk business."

The comedian's room was one of much smaller proportions. Bellsmith was offered the only practical chair, and the new host sat down on the bed.

"*Salut!*" said Bellsmith, lifting his glass.

"How!" replied Charlie Barnes.

He looked with longing into his glass. "I never tasted better stuff than that but once, and that was in a little town eight or ten miles out of Louisville."

He fished an old pipe from his suit-case and began to puff, but they were not there to discuss little towns eight or ten miles out of Louisville—or even old pipes.

"Well," began Bellsmith nonchalantly, "it looks as if we had put it over at last."

To even qualified praise of the new "Eleanor," Barnes flashed up as to an insult.

"Put it over?" he exclaimed. "I should say we did. We knocked 'em silly. I knew we would. Mr. Bellsmith, I'd give ten years of my life if this had been a first night in New York."

Bellsmith laughed. "Charlie, if some one had taken you up every time you had offered to give ten years of your life, you would never have been born at all. In fact, you'd owe time to your parents."

Barnes grunted. "Just the same it's true in this case. Did you see What-'s-his-name, the manager of the house?"

"I saw him," replied Bellsmith, "but about what in particular?"

"About the run of the show. He told you you could have four weeks, didn't he?"

Bellsmith nodded.

"Well, let me tell you something," said Barnes. "You can make that six weeks or eight, if you speak quick enough. I saw him after the show to-night, and he'll listen. He'll listen."

"I'll speak to him," replied Bellsmith, non-committally. He looked up rather cautiously. "Charlie, you never had any idea, did you, that we could go to New York?"

It was a subject that was evidently painful to Barnes.

"No," he said, gruffly, "I never did. Not with this show. New York's killed for us."

"Then what do you think we ought to do, after we finish this run?"

Barnes shrugged. "That's up to you, Mr. Bellsmith."

Bellsmith paused a moment, then fired his bomb-shell.

"Charlie, I've had a big offer."

Barnes looked up, startled. "An offer for the show?"

"Well, that too, but principally an offer to me personally. Did you know that Al Harcourt was out front to-night?"

"No! Was he really?"

Barnes was evidently more hurt that that choice bit of live news had escaped him than curious to know what it might mean.

Bellsmith nodded. "I had a long talk with him. I've found out why Harcourt & Gay were so anxious to buy back the show."

"Why was it?"

Bellsmith told him, and Barnes chuckled with amusement throughout the recital.

"Say!" he exclaimed. "Suppose we had known that four months ago! Would n't we have made 'em squeal? What are you going to do about it now?"

"That's the question," said Bellsmith. "That's what we talked about. Charlie, I've had a real chance to go into the show business."

"Real chance?" demanded Barnes. "What do you call this?"

"No, something bigger than this. Harcourt & Gay have offered me a partnership. They want me to go in with them."

"Go into what?"

"Go into their firm."

"Say that again," commanded Barnes.

"Harcourt & Gay want me to buy a share of their business."

"They want you to buy a share in their business?" demanded Barnes.

"Exactly."

"Well, they 've got a nerve," scoffed Barnes. "I should say they would!"

Bellsmith felt his sense of importance oozing away from him without quite understanding the reason for it.

"Why?" he asked weakly.

"Buy a share in their business?" snorted Barnes. "My good man, did n't you know that Harcourt & Gay are about on the rocks?"

But Bellsmith had learned just how much Barnes's statements of general rumor could be discounted.

"Did you know it?" he retorted, bluntly.

Barnes did qualify a little.

"Well, I did n't know it in the sense that it was published in the papers, but there's been some ugly rumors floating around for a month. I've tried to give Israels a tip and see what he thought, but he would never pay any attention. Israels is like every one else in the show business. He knows it all.

"And I did know this for a fact," insisted Barnes, "that Al Harcourt went as far as Chicago to borrow fifty thousand dollars and did n't get it, nor any part of it. And I know that they've been making overtures to both Birmingham and Rice & McLoughlin to help them out and that neither one of them would do it. I had that right from a man out of Birmingham's own office—that man we met in Pittsfield.

"And so that 's a fact?" mused Barnes, nodding his head thoughtfully. He was now launched in a favorite vein. "You might have guessed it if you 'd watched them closely. They 'd bit off so much that a lot of people was wondering how they were going to chew it. They put up that new theater in New York last year with a grand hurrah and then, as soon as it 's up, it comes out that a 'corporation' is formed to hold it. You know what that means. I 'm willing to bet you that Harcourt & Gay don't own one fifth of the actual stock.

"Their big mistake," he continued, as if he had never made any himself, "was that they had too many expensive shows out this season, none of them any too good. This 'Eleanor' was the first. You know what that was doing when we took it over. Then they tried to run a sort of 'Follies' of their own with a big bunch of stars that was stars in salary but the public did n't see 'em that way. That 's out in Chicago now where we ought to be. 'Out of Chancery' is their one dramatic show. That did make a hit, a big hit, but you can't support two big musical shows out of one dramatic piece."

Barnes's eye was kindling, not really with gloating triumph but with the born joy of the man who loves to be on the "inside."

"Say, you know I had a lively hunch about this," he went on. "I got my first suspicions when Maida Maine went back to them after she left us. She was always a favorite of theirs and expected to step right into something big. But she has n't stepped yet. She has n't

worked all winter and they tell me she 's getting worried.

"Then I 've been hearing one thing after another. You know, Mr. Bellsmith, the show business is a dangerous game, especially if you plunge on big shows, like Harcourt & Gay. They say that in New York, in some lines, you can't borrow money on gold dollars as collateral. I 'll bet you they are n't the only ones that 's anxious. All of us here in the company have been hugging ourselves that we were working for a man who was independent. If what you say is true, I should n't be surprised if the only big asset that Harcourt & Gay have got is that new show of Gaylord and Melcher's. The music publishers and the phonograph people would probably help them to get that going but they certainly won't if Harcourt & Gay don't own it. By George! I think he 's telling the truth. You 've got 'em by the neck!"

Bellsmith sat in silence. He still did not take Charlie Barnes's gossip quite at its full face-value but, even with only a half or a quarter of truth in it, it left him with a genuine admiration for the quiet young Harcourt. For all that that calm young man had shown in his talk, he might have been floating in the confidence of millions. And there really might be a chance that he had been sitting there calmly playing his very last card. That was the kind of thing that even the Bellsmiths acknowledged.

"Then you think," asked Bellsmith pensively, "that Harcourt & Gay had rather pay me for those rights with a partnership than buy them outright?"

"I think that 's the only way they *can* pay for them.

In fact I know blame well it is. Just ask for cash if you want to find out."

"And you yourself," continued Bellsmith, thoughtfully. "If Harcourt & Gay should offer parts to you and—and some of the others, it would not mean as much as it would have meant a year ago!"

"There's a very good chance that it would mean nothing at all," exclaimed Barnes, "unless somebody comes to their rescue, which is n't likely. We saw what happened to Maida Maine. I know that, personally, I would feel pretty shaky if I were tied up to those people at this stage of the game. I want to stay right where I am, thank you, sir!"

A sudden horrible thought seemed to come to his own tenacious little mind, for the very first time.

"Mr. Bellsmith, you did n't have any idea of getting out of the business?"

"I—why, I—well, to tell the truth," began Bellsmith, but Barnes looked at him absolutely aghast.

"Good heavens, Mr. Bellsmith!" he exclaimed. "I thought that you were just getting your stride. I thought that now—with Miss Marshall and all—you were just beginning to get the love of the thing."

There was no doubt about the little man's terror, and on this night of all nights. Here was one more triumph ruined and this one was the triumph of a lifetime. It was almost incredible to Bellsmith that any one could have depended on him as completely as Charlie Barnes had apparently been depending.

He rose from his chair with a gruff, nervous laugh.

"Well, Charlie," he said, "I'm going to bed. Don't

worry. I won't get out of the business before I've got your future pretty well laid out."

But the little comedian was following him to the door, wiping his brow with his snuff-colored sleeve.

"It ain't that, Mr. Bellsmith," he pleaded. "It ain't that. But look at this show we've got now. Don't that mean anything to you?"

More soberly than he had left, Bellsmith went back to his rooms. As he opened the door his feet brushed over a telegram. He took it to the light and found that it was from Dr. MacVickar. The doctor had certainly lost no time. The telegram read:

Don't ask me for any more advice. If you are not able to sail your own ship now, you never will be. Discharged. Cured.

MACVICKAR.

Smiling, Bellsmith went on to the inner rooms. Tilly was not yet asleep, but she listened without much interest to what he told her and having finished the recital he still stood in doubt. Then gently he leaned over and smoothed back her hair as it spread itself over the pillow.

"Sweetheart," he pleaded, "I may be a fool and all that, but I can't help liking Harcourt and apparently he's in a bad hole. It wouldn't hurt us to go in with him—just for those rights and a few thousand dollars more."

Tilly did not reply and he insisted:

"Would you mind very much if I did?"

His wife turned fretfully on the pillow.

"Oh, well," she answered, "if you must, I suppose you must."

And apparently, sooner or later, that was what every one had to say to the helpless Young Bellsmith.

CHAPTER XXXIV

IT was late on a very hot August afternoon when Bellsmith approached the office of Dr. MacVickar. The same nurse was at the same telephone-desk, and Bellsmith asked her not to announce him. Such a request upset, of course, her deepest instincts of office routine but, recognizing Bellsmith as a favored visitor, she consented. The doctor would be at liberty in about ten minutes, she admitted.

For a moment Bellsmith lingered idly beside her little telephone-desk and, exactly as he had done, nine months before, watched her begin immediately her endless writing on the little cards for the doctor's catalogue. Exactly, also, as he had done nine months before, he tried to be friendly.

"Don't you ever get tired of doing that?" he suggested.

The nurse looked up with a rustle of surprised white crispness.

"It has to be done."

"But don't you ever get to the end? Aren't you ever through?"

"There are always new patients."

"I see," said Bellsmith.

In order that the doctor might not suspect his presence he walked out into the main hall of the building,

went to a window, and stood looking down into the street. It was a street which had once been highly typical of Leicester but was becoming less—or more—typical every day, just as one chose to look at it.

Jostled unhappily between tall buildings, two fine old houses still stood within range of Bellsmith's vision. One was of brick, painted red, the other of stucco, painted yellow, with white colonial pillars. Both had been houses where Bellsmith had dined in state but a very few years before. Now, from both of them the paint was peeling and the blinds sagging. On one of the pillars of the portico of the yellow house were nailed the signs of four dressmakers. In the basement of the red brick house a large show-window was being built in for a neighborhood grocery.

The door of the doctor's outer office opened quietly, and a woman, a lady, dressed in black and heavily veiled, came into the hallway. At seeing Bellsmith she started involuntarily and seemed on the point of speaking to him, but Bellsmith was unable to recognize her through her thick veils and, with an air almost furtive, she turned and passed down the hall to the elevator. Bellsmith watched her, puzzled and vaguely troubled. Some one out of his past life she must be, but he was never to know who she was.

It was rather depressing out there in the hall, and Bellsmith was relieved when the nurse, with a guilty smile, came out and beckoned him in.

"The doctor is alone now," she whispered. "I told him there was no one waiting."

She led him into the little corridor and pointed

to the office door. Bellsmith silently pushed it open.

For a second the doctor apparently did not hear him. He sat there, drooped and languid, with his head bowed in his hands. Then he heard the latch snap on the door, looked up, and, like a flash, his whole attitude changed. A welcoming smile spread over his face and his shoulders straightened. Except for his summer clothes of immaculate white linen, he might have been welcoming Bellsmith on any one of his last winter's visits. But Bellsmith had had his moment of insight. Had the doctor, he wondered, always looked like that, drooped and weary, when not on parade to his patients?

The doctor, however, was already on his feet.

"Well, well, well!" he exclaimed, "you're a nice one! I have n't heard from you in three months."

A blank look passed over Bellsmith's face.

"We've been in Europe," he said, "at Deauville. Did n't you ever get our cables?"

"Oh, yes, I got those. Let's see, I got two—one when you landed there and one when you started back. But you might have written."

"I've been too busy."

The doctor grinned. "Busy? *Et tu*, Bellsmith?"

He rolled up the familiar easy-chair. "Sit down and tell me all about it."

Bellsmith sat down and began to roll a cigarette. The doctor watched him with amusement.

"When did you learn to do that?"

"I have n't learned," replied Bellsmith, brushing a tablespoonful of spilled tobacco off his trousers. "I am

still a mind in the makings. A man from the Argentine, on the boat, tried to teach me. Tilly is a wonder at it. Why did n't I think of this in the old days? I could have spent hours doing it."

"Why did n't you?" retorted the doctor. "Or crocheting?"

An awkward silence fell, as it usually does between two persons who have been waiting impatiently for months to see each other. It was cool up there in the office, with the windows wide open and the tip of an elm-tree showing just outside them. As Bellsmith looked at the man at the desk in his crisp, starched linen, he reflected that Dr. MacVickar would probably succeed in making it seem cool wherever he might be, for, outside in the streets, waves of heat were rising from the soft asphalt pavements. As it was, even the doctor still showed little blue shadows under his eyes.

"You look tired," Bellsmith suggested.

The doctor shrugged. "It's been a hard summer."

"And it's not easy work shouldering other people's troubles all day long?"

The doctor looked at him with a twinkle. "Have you found that out, too?"

"Yes," confessed Bellsmith, "I had quite a dose of that last spring, after you cut me adrift."

"I want to hear all about it," repeated the doctor. "I saw by the papers last spring that you had gone into a big firm. What is it? Harcourt & Gay?"

"Yes," replied Bellsmith, "I went in because I could n't get out. I thought that I could but I did n't

realize how deeply I was involved. If I had stopped short last spring it would have left a number of people up in the air. The affair was all tangled up. I got to the point where I had to go in deeper—”

“To hold what you had gained,” suggested the doctor.

“Well, hardly that,” replied Bellsmith. “I did n’t mean wholly money.”

“Neither did I,” said the doctor, “mean—wholly money.”

Bellsmith flushed. “You score, doctor. I’m getting rusty.

“Well, anyway,” he explained, “there I was. I was in so deep that I had to keep on going in. Was n’t that your theory of my case?”

The doctor smiled ruefully. “My theory! My dear chap, it won’t do you any harm now to tell you that my theory in your case was very much like that of a class in chemistry. The professor stands up before his pupils and performs a certain standard experiment. He does it to demonstrate the inevitability of immutable laws, but every time in his secret heart he is praying fervently that it will work.”

Bellsmith laughed, but even he had felt a certain perfunctory quality in the heartiness of the doctor’s talk. They had been apart too long to pick up the give and take of their old conversations. For his own part the doctor also seemed to recognize it.

“How is Mrs. Bellsmith?” he asked quietly. “Am I going to see her again?”

“You certainly are,” replied Bellsmith heartily.

"We must have you down at the house some night soon, although just at present the house is all torn to atoms. My wife has ideas on interior decoration. They run largely to lounges and divans—and shelves of new books."

The doctor laughed. "Then you intend to live there? Mrs. Bellsmith is going to give up her career?"

"For a time at least," replied Bellsmith. "I am the one who has got the career just at present. We are going to bring out a new show in Atlantic City next week. It will go to New York in September. But we shall be here, off and on. Mrs. MacVickar and you must certainly come down to dinner."

"Thank you," said the doctor absently. "We have a cottage at the shore until the first of October. You two must spend a week-end with us."

"We should be delighted," replied Bellsmith.

But both of them were merely going through the formalities that men do go through on such occasions, sketching out future meetings up to eternity, both of them knowing that none of those meetings would ever take place. They would never see much of each other again. It had been their business that had brought them together, and now their business was done.

The doctor picked up his fountain-pen and thoughtfully screwed on the top. It was the same old familiar mannerism, the same unconscious hint of dismissal. Bellsmith rose to his feet with a sudden vigorous air.

"Well, doctor, remember that we expect you some night soon."

"Fine!" said the doctor, "and don't forget about that week-end."

They shook hands.

"Good-by."

"Good-by."

CHAPTER XXXV.

BELLSMITH passed rapidly from the foot of the elevator to the street. For a moment, as he walked through the familiar hall, he had almost an odd sense of homesickness, but out in the hot August air it passed quickly away.

At the door he paused a moment to look up and down for his car. A traffic policeman had moved it a few doors up the street, and Bellsmith lifted his hand to signal to Keefe but, as he did so, he heard a voice speaking to him.

"Excuse me, sir."

He looked around and saw a man, neatly dressed in blue serge, with his hand respectfully at his straw hat. He had very blue eyes and very blonde hair and stood with a sort of military erectness. From some vague, far-off recollection, Bellsmith recognized him as one of the stewards on one of the river boats.

"Excuse me, sir," repeated the man, "but can you direct me to the office of Dr. MacVickar?"

Bellsmith motioned over his shoulder.

"Right in there. Take the elevator. It's on the second floor."

"Thank you, sir."

But as the trim, erect little man disappeared into the

shadows of the hall with his rapid, deck-treading steps, Bellsmith looked after him, musing.

"Now, what in the world," he wondered, "can be the matter with *him*?"

THE END

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